

Anam Cara

Guardian1

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This story was first published on April 11th, 2001, and was last updated on June 23rd, 2001.

FicLab ID: Lrlw8kcc/lq2ex64c/50000E5U

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Summary

title Anam Cara
author Guardian1
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/251499/>
published April 11th, 2001
updated June 23rd, 2001
words 27,378
chapters 6
status Complete
rating Fiction T
tags Adventure, Complete, Fanfiction, Final Fantasy IX, Games

Description:

Sequel to 'All Fall Down' - someone's out to kill Freya Crescent, and it's up to Amarant to help her. But can she deal with issues between her and her past at the same time? Complete. Thank you to all readers and reviewers.

1. Treno

Anam Cara

treno

Events can pile up on top of one another, with nary a catalyst in sight; people sometimes pass it off as coincidence or don't mention it at all.

The answer to the question that nobody asked is: there's no such thing as coincidence. Things happen because they were always meant to happen; coincidence is a term uneasy people give to outward displays of fate.

People are uneasy because fate's a bitch.

'Dear Amarant!'

Amarant sighed and rubbed his forehead. Lani didn't need to put the exclamation marks in. It

wouldn't make him any happier or angrier about the letter. Why did she do it? The exclamation marks always got exponentially bigger in her letters to him, as if the woman got more and more excited as she scratched out her big round child's handwriting.

'Met nice guy in Alexandria when you were off faffing around in the mountains last week or whatever. Decided to go with him, can you blame me no you can't! Left this in the secret place just so you wouldn't worry or something.'

Like he would. Not only because Amarant was not prepossessed to worrying, but because as any smart person knew: don't screw with women with enormous axes. It made your life span a hell of a lot shorter, even if the woman had freakin' stupid taste in hats.

'Cross your fingers for me, hope it works out!'

She shouldn't have put that in. Lani put that in every time she came across a new man possibility. It was probably bad luck, especially considering Lani's track record with men. She swapped them like particularly disposable marbles.

'I'll contact you in two months if it all goes okay, right? Don't get caught, Ammy!'

‘Ammy’ shuddered.

‘Back in no time I bet — the best and most beautiful bounty-hunter ever, Lani!PS. If you come and find me and mess this up I will shit on you!’

As if anybody else would have written the letter. With a painfully disgusted look on his face, Amarant Coral balled up the little bit of flimsy in his hands and shoved it back into the rock with all time’s other notes. That was a setback — travelling with the little brunette bountyhunter sated his thirst for conversation, if nothing else, and travelling without her would be — lonely. He could admit that. Lonely.

Oh, well. It wouldn’t be forever. Lani couldn’t hold on to a man even if she smothered her hands with glue. All there was to do was settle down, maybe get a little bit of travelling in before she came back and complained about every little place they went.

Time would fly, that was for certain.

Really.

He knew it would.

Definitely.

Ah, hell, he'd go to Treno. Maybe there was something he could steal.

The bounty on his head had been static far too long.

After travelling rain-sodden for many days, sleeping on pine needles and grass, Freya clung to her bed like it was a holy shrine bell. She was used to roughing it — after all, the past three years of her life could well be defined as 'roughing it' — but a nice warm dry bed, with clean sheets and soft blankets and a mattress and pillows — oh, pillows! — could clearly also be defined as heaven.

The Burmecian eagerly stripped off her crimson coat and helmet, the things that had kept her from being truly waterlogged (everyone knew that the Burmecians were wisest in the ways of waterproofing) and practically kicked her feet on the rough wooden boards in joy, left in only the tunic she wore beneath to keep it from chafing. Carefully she put the winged helmet down, leant her spear against the wall, and folded the coat over a chair — no use in mussing anything.

Mentally, she ticked off the points in her head as to what she had to do.

Hot bath — hot meal — clean clothes...

Long, long talk with herself.

Her trek out of Burmecia had gone a little haywire and she'd eventually settled over to the city that never slept. She defined it as the only place where she didn't have bad memories to haunt her as she tried to come to terms with herself.

It's not like Fratley and I ever went anywhere together anyway, she thought rebelliously, the first trickling sign of anger against the real Fratley. Why did he never let me go anywhere with him, except out on missions? Why was he trying to shelter me from the real world? The only time I ever got out and saw the world was on your trail. Why, love, why? Anger melted as she got the tight feeling in her throat, knowing that never again would he be able to answer her question.

For a very long tim, in order to pull herself back together, Freya hugged her pillow tightly and lay on her bed.

Freya, you have to get over this... remember the code, you must be able to stand up and fight at all

times. You would not be able to stand up and fling a rock at somebody in your state.

The Burmecian took some deep breaths, then nuzzled the pillow and decided to mope. There was no code of honour against that.

Five hundred and sixty-three down...

Strike two, one to go.

The tally was doing quite well, although the last ones had been far too easy. They were old and retired and it had been quite easy to strangle both of them until the skin was discoloured black and blue. Pathetic, really, when things could be so much better.

Revenge was a dish best served in large helpings.

However, eventually one wasn't hungry any more at the end of the hunt, when one was so blooded out that more would just stain the bloodstains. After all, when this was done, he could finally rest, yes, finally. Rest good and easy. Everyone could rest easy after this, sleep without wakefulness, sleep without the nightmare of having to stay behind.

He would be their saviour. They would hail him as a hero, all of them alive or dead, though there were more now than the latter. They would feast in the hall of scales until they wept from joy!

One more to go... he'd sent someone on ahead, not of his ilk but good enough at the price he'd demanded; he doubted that the assassin would last very long but it would be good to soften the last one up for an easy hunt.

The last one, he'd been following for such a long time. Now that his target was alone, he could get what he'd been craving all for so long — this would be sweet.

It wasn't easy to catch Treno in any sort of semblance of 'midnight'. For a city that never slept, any sort of midnight was the few seconds when people actually decided that sleep might be a good thing and quiet reigned supreme on the smoky streets.

The city that never sleeps was named badly. It should have been 'the city full of insomniacs', but 'never sleeps' sounds better and marginally more healthy.

Freya had stumbled on one of these quiet moments, the lull in the night when only the stupid and the brave and the both venture out. The calm was eerie on the normally bustling streets and she felt exposed when before she had felt free, with clean hair and a brushed coat and an unidentified-meat stew settling in her stomach. Her claws clattered on the cobblestones and she was shadowed by the blaring yellow glow of the lanterns, and suddenly she felt comforted that she'd brought her spear. Setting her helmet lower to make her appear more ferocious, Freya stopped on the street, where a few people were still milling around; they were under the spell of midnight too, saying nothing, as quiet as rain upon a lake.

She looked around, head twisting thoughtfully as she surveyed her surroundings. The night suited Treno better than the day ever could; the daylight just showed every stain, every cracked window, every sign of the tired old town that it had come to be. Nighttime shaded the imperfections, gave it panache, gave it mystery...

The Dragon Knights of Burmecia are trained from when they are ten years old. Had they not been, the crossbow bolt that was fired from the alleyway would have gone straight through her neck. As it

was, Freya's trained sixth sense felt the whine of the crossbow before she could hear it. Her head twisted and the bolt sailed harmlessly by into a wall; Freya spun around, weapon fluidly ripped from the harness off her back, turning to the alleyway and jumping to the side before another bolt could be fired.

There was a clatter as the crossbow was dropped and a completely black-robed figure barrelled out of the alleyway, a spiked mace in their hands. Freya blocked the first clumsy swings with her pike, then jumped back as they grew in intensity; dragon's breath! What in the name of every dank hell was happening? She hated fighting like this; Freya jumped back, using the advantage she had of a long weapon, trying to keep out of the way of the smashing blows delivered by the man.

Some people screamed and fled and others stared wide-eyed at the ensuing battle. Freya had to admit that her attacker was dangerous, but the sort of dangerous borne out of fierce determination and a single-minded desperation to kill or be killed — a suicide fighter, with nothing left to lose. Unpredictable, undefinable. She hated fighters like that. A man, as well; women walked differently.

He'd caught her by surprise, which was never good, but she had gotten her footing back and she would be fine just if she disarmed the fool, by everything that was holy that mace hurt, having to hold her spear in two hands and use it as a convoluted sword to ward him off; parry parry thrust —

That was a mistake; polearms needed to use their advantage of length. As he slammed her mace down on her head, she blocked with her pike, and he deftly kicked her footing out from under her and gave her a kick to her chest that knocked the breath out of her, then a blow at the back which hit her kidneys, which had her writhing in pain...

The black-garbed assassin looked around at the huddled handful of people on the sidelines, shrugged and picked the dragoon's spear up. Then, like a streak of summer lightning, he was out of her view, and suddenly there were screams and garbled bloodied sobs and bubbles of breath and the casual normal sound of punctured spear wounds.

Oh, Gods!

Freya stumbled to her feet as the man nonchalantly came back from his mission, hands bloodied from the corpses that now littered the

street. He still carried her spear — his mace was lying in the street next to her, and now she was the one disarmed.

Just her bloody luck.

The man raised his spear to drive into her stomach, but having wielded the weapon all her life, Freya knew better than anybody what it's limitations were. As he drove it down she flung it back, with all her upper-body strength gripping onto the shaft of metal and flinging him over her head. Her assailant skidded back onto the flagstones of the street, and deftly flipping her bloodied spear back over in her hands, she slammed the point through his ribcage and into his heart, stabbing him until the flopping body stopped writhing.

When you stand in the middle of the street with a cooling corpse at your feet, littered with bodies around you with blood on your hands, people often get the wrong idea. Freya admitted this. Even she momentarily got the wrong idea.

“The Guard! The Guard! Get the Guard!”

“Oh, Gods, are they all dead!”

“Entraya! Oh, god, she ain't breathing, and I can't feel a —”

“MURDERER!”

The last denunciation was the loudest of all, and suddenly Freya felt herself boxed in on all sides by many angry denizens of Treno.

“Burmecian wretch!”

“Someone get the Guard! Oh, thank the heavens —”

“You’ll hang for this!”

The crowd parted for the Treno Guard, who ringed around the bloodied area and deftly disarmed the flabbergasted dragoon. Things seemed to be snowballing into one enormous mess.

“You’ve gotten the wrong idea,” she said weakly, knowing how incredibly pathetic she sounded — and looked. “I —”

“Save your words for trial,” one of the guards muttered darkly.

Another one, who looked half-Burmecian and a fraction kinder, was wrapping a rope around her wrists. “Don’t worry, lady Knight. I bet this is a big mistake.” He looked more optimistic than Freya felt.

“Trial?” one of the citizens shrieked, eavesdropping. “Hang the murderer now!”

Freya left the square bewildered to the chorus of jeering and screaming inhabitants, wondering exactly how this had happened.

It really wasn't her night.

Damn!

He knew that Nodune was incompetent, but not that incompetent — and now he was dead!

Damn!

He'd arrived about an hour after the incident, staring at the milling crowd around the bodies, senses hungering at the scent of blood. When he found his tongue, he was able to mutter, “Who did this?”

A human citizen — a male with a female weeping onto his shoulder — turned around and answered his question. “Some Burmecian wench gone insane,” he answered heatedly. “Killed my niece — Entraya...” The woman on his shoulder broke into fresh sobs.

“Where is she now?”

“Taken to the jail. Hanging ain’t good enough for the likes of her.”

His mind raced. If he tried to break in alone he’d never get through to her, and if he left it any longer — well, he didn’t want to leave it any longer. The time for waiting was over.

With feigned desperation, he plunged through the crowd and fell upon the black-robed body as if tenderly, propping up the head with one of his large hands, poking through the cloth. Then he stood up and looked at the inquisitive crowd.

“How many of you have lost friends tonight to that monster?”

There were scattered angry mumblings and shouts from the crowd.

“My brother lies dead at my feet,” he declared, which was a rampant lie; his brothers had lain dead for the past fifteen years. “And now his killer, just because she is a stinking Burmecian knight, will most likely go free! What happened to justice?”

More mumblings, even angrier this time.

“Obviously it’s time to take justice into our own hands. I for one am not going to let my brother rot while his murderer still breathes! Look at how many dead lie around us!”

“My daughter was barely sixteen!” the man who had spoken to him before shouted.

“Exactly. Why should she be allowed to live when a little girl is dead?”

Shouts, now. Encouragement. Anger.

“I say we take justice into our own hands!”

Cheering, now. The anger and shock of a crowd is a malleable thing, especially to one who knows how to direct it... he’d had a lot of practice back home.

“Who’s with me?”

This time, everybody cheered, and as if they were birds, each one flocked to the leader, who lead them off triumphantly the way the guards had gone, brandishing a dagger.

The only thing missing were the torches and pitchforks.

He smirked.

Fate is indeed a bitch.

Had Amarant arrived an hour earlier, he could have assisted Freya. Had he arrived half an hour earlier, he could have at least prevented those people's deaths. Ten minutes earlier — well, who can say? However, he arrived five minutes late, grumpy, and generally apathetic until he was confronted by the stragglers of a crowd and people cleaning up bodies. An 'acquaintance' of his, a thief by the name of Andry, was busily 'helping' the corpses by removing jewelry and wallets and anything else that might have hampered them on the way to Paradise. However, when he saw the hulking shadow of the Flaming Amarant over him, he squawked innocently and dropped a few gil onto the pavement.

"What happened here?"

"Nuthin'," Andry said immediately. "I wuz jus' helpin' these good people with their things'n all —"

Amarant rolled his eyes. "I mean with the corpses, you fool."

"Oh." Andry began picking up the spilled coins nonchalantly. 'Some Burmecian tart cut a few

throats and they shoved her in jail. Then this big ugly oaf — sorta reminded me of you, heh, heh — “the thief blanched when Amarant appeared not to be amused.” — but, ahem, got up a crowd, now they’ve gone off t’hopefully storm the jail and kill ‘er or something.’ He sighed happily. “‘Aven’t seen a mob like that since last year’s Summer Festival. Jus’ beautiful.”

Amarant went on full alert, moving back into the shadows. “Why would a rat kill so many people?”

“Don’t ask me.” The thief bent down again. “But either the guards’ll hang her or the crowd will. Heard some people say she was a dragon knight... thought that was a load of tosh, though. Wish she’d left her coat — those sorts of things leave a mint on the market, an’ it’s not like she’s gonna need it now, is she?... hey, where’d he go?”

Freya had long ago stopped shouting and had taken to sitting back on the straw pallet, swallowing hard to soothe her hoarse throat, bewildered and angry and more than a little bit worried. She knew that once Garnet and Zidane were informed, she’d be granted amnesty, but there was the matter of her

holding out before then to generally unfriendly guards and the whispers of a mob outside the jail.

The whispers turned into far-off angry voices and the voices turned into shouts, chantings, the clink of weapons being drawn. She herself clung to her pike like it was a piece of wood floating out in an ocean — she wouldn't have been allowed to have it had the very upset Burmecian guard protested that she wouldn't cause any harm with it and that it was sacrilege to take it away. He was dreadfully unhappy — imagine, arresting one of the last Dragoons for murder! He kept muttering something about how his 'mam would never forgive me', but the other guards wouldn't let him get near her; they guarded the top entrance and stayed well away from the otherwise empty cells. Freya was grateful nobody else shared her prison.

The voices were getting louder, and Freya attempted to shy away from the little barred window that joined her jail cell to the outside world. Feet stomped loudly on the cobblestones outside; she hugged the wall — to no avail, however.

“In here!” someone shrieked. To her deepest shame, the Burmecian found herself cowering like a

rat in a hole, but straightened up quickly to take whatever came head-on.

What came head-on was an pitch-soaked, flaming rag that smouldered on the greasy floor before being joined by more. Gleeful sniggers emanated from the barred rectangle and Freya pressed herself against the bars of her cell; damn it! If only she could cast a spell, anything, but she'd probably only get in more trouble than she already was in, and she couldn't even poke her pike out.

Suddenly the cell was thick with cloth and fire, the straw in the pallet alight. Freya threw caution to the wind and grabbed onto the bars of her cell. "I require assistance!" she hollered. There appeared to be no reply — probably fending off the mob at the entrance, she thought gloomily. Another rag was thrown, deftly aimed at her back; she quickly slammed herself back to put it out and used her tail to fling it away. The little cell was full of fire and smoke now, greasy and choking. "For the love of everything holy," she muttered, then began to choke as the smoke filled her lungs. She had to get out of there!

The Burmecian hit the floor, taking deep breaths of the smoke-free air not there yet. Freya wasn't

particularly afraid of fire, but she hated being boxed up in tiny little spaces; she was secretly claustrophobic and she was running out of time. More chokes started as the smoke began to drift her way, more rags being thrown in every minute they could soak and light them. Pitch burned foul and smoky.

Suddenly, with the screech of tortured metal, a bar was snapped open on her cell. Freya gave a slight mew of surprise.

“You sound like a kitten,” a rough, husky voice grunted. “Come’n help me with this last one, otherwise they’ll storm the place down and you’ll be flatter than a griddle cake.”

Freya rose out of the smoke and wiped her sooty eyes, staring in joyous disbelief. “Amarant?”

“Who else! Is that smoke making you blind?” The hulking figure grabbed onto another bar and tugged with all his might. It soon gave way and there was a little opening for her to push through. “Hurry up, woman.”

“Don’t call me woman,” she grumbled, but eagerly squeezed her lithe frame through the

*opening, feeling so relieved she could have floated.
“What are you doing here?”*

*“Rescuing you, obviously. No time for talking,”
he commanded. “Let’s get out of here.” He lumbered
off to the side, crimson locks looking like the flames
he was named for as the fire flickered off them.*

*For the first time in her life, Freya followed the
bounty-hunter gratefully.*

Shit!

Not again!

*This was turning out to be a bad night, and it was
all Nodune’s fault. Now the bitch was gone and his
revenge was set back once more! Fools of guards,
they deserved to have their necks wrung out to dry!
He had to narrowly avoid being arrested himself,
but in the scuffle that followed the dragon knight’s
escape, none of the mob were prosecuted.*

*How could she have gotten out? Those bars were
twisted. The rat never could have done that by
herself; she must have had help. Strong help. Help
that could twist iron bars...*

Something flickered in his mind, then died out abruptly. No time for musings; it was the knight that mattered, not her help.

Damn it to hell...

Shoving his dagger back in the sheath, he stalked off into the night.

It would not end this way. Hmph... if you wanted something done right, you had to do it yourself.

For the Koralle!

Amarant dumped the Burmecian in his crude camp on the outskirts of the city, where she cleaned her wounds up and related her story. He didn't comment, except for the occasional nod, busily attempting to chew to death some dried meat rations by way of breakfast.

Once she had finished, the red-haired man turned back to her, brooding. "Doesn't sound like that man was just mad," he said after a while. "He was out to kill the witnesses. An assassination."

"Who would want to assassinate me?" Freya curled up on the blanket she'd been provided tiredly.

“Honestly!”

“Hmph... don’t discount it. It sounds to me like an assassination.” Amarant watched the woman curl bonelessly up on the sheet, then sighed and flung a canvas over her. “Get some sleep and stay under that. I’ll go and check out Treno for you. Don’t move.”

Freya would have argued with him, but once again, tiredness and relief won over contrariness, and she slipped away into sleep. Amarant looked at the lumpy figure beneath the canvas briefly, then sighed and slipped away into the forest.

Well.

At least things were interesting now.

If you can call one of you comrades being called up for murder as well as attempting to dodge assassination interesting, but one could at least label it more exciting than waiting around in the mountains for Lani to come back and announce, ‘I hate men!’, then proceed to tell him long and greasily sordid tales about her ex-flame. It was getting rather funny by now. She always said the same thing.

Treno by daylight was worse than Treno by night — harder to hide, for one thing — but the thieves' quarter was always open to him, and thus the mucky little alleyways that led to it were the places he haunted. As always when he entered any room, there was a noticeable hush, but it ended when it appeared he wasn't there to beat anybody and headed straight to the bar. It was curiously empty — only a few cardsharks and wallet-slitters were there at the moment, lost in their cups.

"Small ale," he nodded to the barkeep, pushing a few gil across the counter.

The man obeyed with an anxious grin, taking one of his cleaner mugs and taking it to his barrel. "Haven't seen you around in a while, sir."

Amarant grunted noncommittally. "I've been travelling."

"Ah." The mug was placed before him with a great deal of speed, and as he sipped, Amarant cast his eyes around the generally empty bar.

"Losing business, I see?"

"For now, anyway." The man straightened up and smoothed out his apron nervously. "Thought

you and the little lady would be out with the other hunters.”

Everybody called Lani the ‘little lady’. She had awful manners and could quite conceivably drink herself to death, but she could flutter her eyelashes and declare ‘La, sir!’ to the best of them. Everybody who wanted to survive with their genitals intact called her as such.

“Not a bounty big enough to interest.” Amarant swirled the ale around in his cup, then took a gulp. “Not for me, anyway.”

The barman raised an eyebrow, moving down the other end of the tiny bar and mopping at it ineffectually. “Not even the latest one? Forty-thou a head, so I hear. Biggest one since poor ol’ Radeen ‘Slitter’ Stevens...”

“Forty-thousand?” he said in surprise. It was far larger than the bounty on his head; and with the way people were always trying to remove it, no wonder every bounty hunter in existence was after the poor sod. “Somebody must have murdered a...”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he blanched inwardly, slammed down his half-full cup down on the bar and practically tore the door off it’s

hinges in an effort to get out of it. The stragglers inside stared at him in as he practically stampeded out the bar.

Dragon's blood, no wonder every bounty hunter in existence was out of Treno. He was a fool to let Freya sleep on the outskirts of the city! Forty-thousand — Lani would turn him in for that sort of money! They'd be combing every continent for her head. She'd have to be on the run constantly; so many of them out there, and the best might band together in order to better achieve the bounty. It would be impossible to hide her, there was no place that was safe — for her at least...

Except one.

Stalking through the streets of Treno, Amarant inwardly growled at his conscience. After so many years of disuse, he didn't really appreciate it speaking up.

No. I've never even taken Lani there. She's not worth it.

They'd all do it for you in a heartbeat.

It's sacred!

So is life, and you know they'll kill her outright if you don't find anywhere else left to hide.

...

You of all people know what it's like to be hunted.

... I'll just send word to Zidane and his little queen.

She's wanted for murder. They can't take off the bounty — they don't work with the thieves — and even if they change it to 'wanted alive', most bounty hunters don't know the difference. And what about the assassin? They'll be back, you know —

I never knew you talked so much.

I am you.

Damn.

You know what you have to do, don't you?

... ONLY until it's all resolved. Nothing to do with me. And I don't like it one bit.

So engrossed was he that he almost bumped into the Treno gates. Swearing to set them alight the next time he had some pitch and a will to do so, Amarant stalked once more onto the plains outside the city.

When he had felt that he had walked further enough, he rolled his eyes with the humiliation of what he was about to do, drew out a battered old flute from the pouch at his waist and gave it a piercing whistle.

With blurred speed, immediately a little pink-and-red-and-white creature came to his call, the round ball on its head bobbing merrily. Amarant had never felt the need to call on a Moog before, but sometimes one had to swallow pride until one felt bilious.

“Kupo! I’m Mook! This is Moguo’s sick day. You’re a friend of Zidane’s, aren’t you?” the little thing chirped, unbearably cheerful. “I was just saying —”

“I need to send a letter,” the red-haired man cut him off. Moguo’s sick day? Just his luck. “Immediately. To Zidane and Dagger. Got any paper?”

“I can remember it if you like, I have a great memory, all of us do, you know, and I can put it down on paper as I go along —”

Amarant shuddered. Well, that was fine, he supposed; he couldn’t write that well, either. Any note he tried to write would come out, ‘to Zitarn and

Daggre'. "... fine. I'll tell you the message. But, if you breathe a word of this to anybody else..." he let the sentence hang in the air. The moogles nodded hastily.

"Good." Amarant racked his brains for a moment to decide exactly how to frame the entire sorry mess of a situation. Zidane and Dagger would have most likely heard the story by now as Treno would need to take the case to the Royal Court; however, there were the political ramifications of the entire thing to consider as well, and they could throw an enormous spanner in the works. Amarant disliked politics.

He took a breath and started. "Tell Zidane that I've got Freya..."

"... and that I've taken her somewhere safe. Don't try to get her off free, won't work, overturned anyway, situation goes balls-up if you try. Just make the bounty alive instead of dead. Will send you more messages — and don't worry, the little chit is innocent, only criminally stupid. — Amarant."

Garnet pushed her chair back and went to stand moodily in front of the window. "He's right, you

know,” she sighed after a while. “I hate that.”

Knowing she was at the end of her tether by now, Zidane Tribal moved up behind his Queen and gave her shoulders a reassuring rub. “Well, at least Amarant has her. She’ll be safe now.”

“Who would try to assassinate Freya?” she burst out. ‘And we know she wouldn’t kill anybody. This is all an enormous set-up, Zidane, and I don’t like it one bit.’ She shuddered and leant back into him. “We’re just lucky that Amarant made it in time.”

“That was rather a stroke of luck,” Zidane agreed. “And... I’ve been thinking... I want to go down to Treno and see what I can dig up. Maybe if I can find the killer, we can get Freya out of this without a riot on our hands.”

Garnet turned around, brown eyes soft. “That would take a weight off my mind. Promise not to get hurt?”

“Like I would.” He deposited a swift kiss on her lips, then gave her a cocky grin. “Besides, I think it’d be good to get out of the palace. Everybody’s brewing for a scandal. You really should do the right thing by me, miss, and marry me, do right by me and not live in sin —”

“Was that a proposal? Get out of here, Zidane!” the brunette said laughingly, gently tugging a lock of his hair. He grinned, saluting, then sped off down the corridor.

The Queen of Alexandria sat back down again and pulled her chair into the desk, already in her mind’s eye composing the letter to the Mayor of Treno.

2. Aless

Anam Cara

aless

Later on, Freya realized, that the entire business had good points to it. Every cloud has it's silver lining, as her mother used to say; she hadn't been able to think about Fratley even once. The closest she could get was feeling a tender bruise on her heart whenever it rained.

She liked it that way.

They'd been travelling for three days, keeping to the dense forest of the mountain, moving along a mental path only Amarant could pinpoint. He utterly refused to tell her where they were headed, and the long footsore journey was not exactly filled with sparkling conversation. The most involved conversation she actually had with the man was when he answered her with about four sentences.

Amarant seemed to be brooding. Freya swore that about two or three times, he was hesitant to go forward, and wanted to take her back; but then he doggedly turned forward without a word.

Emotionally exhausted, guilty, lonely and even a little afraid, Freya was distinctly tired with the whole shoddy situation. She craved rain-damp grass beneath her feet, the soft drizzly Burmecian morning, Fratley's arms around her —

Pushing all those thought immediately out of her mind, she slogged on steadily, turning her mind to more immediate comforts, like being clean for more than five minutes. Amarant hadn't let her stop once on the journey, and only let her catch about an hours' sleep at a time — he never slept himself, she noticed. It was only when she saw him in that state did Freya become truly worried about the entire situation. She was thankful that young king Puck would at least be wise enough to be able to tell that it was all an enormous mistake and not to declare war immediately on Alexandria or something. (He had informed Freya quite gaily that he was looking forward to declaring war on someone. His father had been the same.)

It was only after eight days' long trek that they stopped, at the top of an enormous forested hill. Freya reckoned that they were halfway between Burmecia and Treno, travelling along the mountain range where the three lowlands met. They'd had no trouble with the upper south gate, as the guards were associated with Lindblum and not Treno, and Amarant avoided the village of Dali like the plague anyway. He'd been so distracted that by the end of the journey he had practically forgotten the dragon knight was there.

"Is this it?" Freya asked curiously.

The red-haired man looked down at her, and his deepset dark eyes clearly showed he was haunted. "Almost," he said after a while.

She looked out onto the valley, taking off her helmet so that she could see it more clearly. The area was so deeply forested that it was a sea of green as far as the eye could see; however, there was an enormous rocky outcrop jutting out of the middle, and the beginning of a mountain range leading off from it.

Amarant turned to her, his face dark. "Promise — no, swear to me that you will never take another living soul to where I am about to take you."

The Burmecian looked taken aback at his vehemence, but nodded swiftly. “I swear on my mother’s grave.”

He nodded and ceremonially spit on his hand. Cringing slightly, she did the same, and his hand dwarfed hers as they slapped them together. Amarant searched her face for a moment, looking for sincerity, then his own cleared and he began sprinting down the hill. “Then let’s go!”

The hill was steep and very thickly forested and there were many times when Freya only just managed not to severely injure herself by impaling herself on a tree branch. Amarant travelled down like he’d been born running the mountains, and she found it hard to keep up with him; he had surprising speed for such a big, blocky frame.

Finally the hill stopped abruptly at the rocky outcrop, and Freya had to backpedal so as to not slam ungracefully against the dusty side. She looked up; the cliff-face seemed to go up for years.

“This is going to be an absolute joy to climb,” she said dubiously.

“We’re not climbing.” Amarant was searching along the wall.

“Is there a cave?”

He smiled to himself, then brightened, having obviously found what he was looking for amidst some scrub growing out of a crevice in the rock. “Just come over here and you’ll see.”

Freya nimbly hopped over to where Amarant gestured. The way he pulled back the scrub showed a narrow crevice that looked like it definitely didn’t go anywhere. She raised an eyebrow at him quizzically.

“Come on. Go on ahead. Trust me.”

“As far as I can throw you, but I’ll go in anyway,” she grinned, and squeezed through the little crack. What she had thought was a dead—end back to the little crevice was indeed solid rock, but once one was wedged painfully inside, you could shuffle through yet another crevice concealed at the very side of it.

“Do I go through here?”

“What d’you *think*?”

The Burmecian rolled her eyes and blindly struggled through the rocky little opening. It was jagged and dark and there was filtered light up ahead

where even more foliage covered the ending crack. Amarant had managed to cram himself behind her, and she felt him push her — not roughly — out through the branches and leaves and into the bright sunlight, and she found herself stamping on pine-needles in a little thicket of trees so dense that she could not truly see the sky.

“How strange,” she commented vaguely to herself.

Amarant chuckled behind her, a low, husky, gravelly sound. It was rather pleasant; she realized she’d never truly heard him laugh before. “Keep on forward,” he commanded.

Intrigued by the tone in his voice, she advanced through until she had reached the end of the minature forest and the top of a hill.

Freya rubbed her eyes in disbelief.

It was a sun-flooded valley, carpeted in soft green grass, the rock of the outcrop framing an almost flat landscape. There were another few thickets hugging the walls, but most of the space was given up to the vast expanse of mind-numbing electric emerald green. Opposite where she was a crystal waterfall tumbled and roared down into a pristine blue lake,

deep and bubbling, obviously to feed an underground stream; the lake was deep and wide and took up about an eighth of the surprisingly large amount of space cuddled deep within the outcrop. The grass nodded with bright wildflowers and birds sang in the trees as if no living being had ever breathed in the area. Freya was stupefied at the untouched pure beauty, the vista that lay before her that looked like it had come out of some fanciful oil painting.

“What is this place?” she breathed, and she saw Amarant looking at the wide expanse of paradise with wide-eyed reverence.

“Heaven,” he said simply, then flushed a little at his words, growling and mangling a word deep in his throat. “*Aless.*”

If it had been Alexandria or Lindblum he would have been stopped at least a dozen times on his rounds, but in Treno, Zidane Tribal was only known by his name and not his face. He would have wrapped his tail around his waist just to make sure, but ruefully he remembered that he would be more likely known as ‘Zidane-the-man-who-lives-in-the

— palace-with-that-nice-Queen-Garnet-if-you-catch-my-drift, heh-heh— heh,’ and not ‘Zidane-with-the-tail-who-just-helped-save-the-world— thank-you-very-much.’

However, the city was still buzzing with the news of Freya’s escape, and Zidane realized afterwards that the fact that she escaped at all would mean that they’d have a doubly hard case to fry. Since she escaped, it meant quite obviously to Treno that of course she was horribly guilty.

The bounty posters weren’t that flattering, either. Freya looked like a bad cross between a drowned hamster and a haystack. Nobody would ever be able to find her from that awful picture were it not for the accurate physical description beneath that, and the magic words, ‘Wanted alive — forty-thousand gil.’

Puck and Dagger were in almost daily correspondence now. Puck had been having to restrain angry citizens who couldn’t believe that anyone dared besmirch their famous dragon knight’s name and that it was all a anti-Burmecian conspiracy, and Fratley was currently having kittens over the entire situation. Apparently Freya had actually run away from Fratley before the murder happened, citing some pale excuse about ‘needing

some time away'. That *wasn't* the Freya he knew, though he'd always had a sinking feeling in his heart about the supposed happiness that Freya and Fratley shared; from the old descriptions that Freya had given to him of what her lover had been like before, new Fratley contained no shred of the man he'd once been. Zidane didn't blame her.

Having ambled gaily through the main streets from the entrance, veering sharply towards the left, the blonde finally reached the establishment that he had been aiming for and scanned the tables, grinning when he caught a glimpse of a shining pot-helmet and a shock of flamingly red hair at a table. Cinna, Blank, Marcus — let it never be said that the Tantalus boys didn't pull through. Baku and the triplets were back at Lindblum, but as far as Zidane was concerned, those three combined could quite successfully steal the world if they tried.

"Thanks for coming," he acknowledged, leaning down on the table. "Found anything yet?"

Marcus pushed a chair to him. "Some, but it's all confusing," he admitted. "Either our facts aren't supposed to add up or this guy is really ugly."

"Sounds like a real nutcase, too, from what his motives are," Cinna chimed in.

Zidane pulled his chair in. “Right. Just tell me everything, okay? Let’s start from exactly what *happened* that night.”

The fiery redhead shot Zidane a look, dropping his voice. “Just be sure not to talk too loud; you wouldn’t believe how touchy these people have been getting about this entire thing. It’s awful, trying to get them to talk.”

“I can well believe,” he said ruefully.

Marcus pushed his knotted headscarf a little further down over his eyes. “Well, it’s like this,” he began. “People run away in the street because your friend Freya and a man ‘all in black’ are fightin’ tooth and nail right in the main road. Real late at night. It begins to get bad so some people scream and run away — but...” he sighed. “This is where it gets messy. Some people swear black and blue that they saw Freya pike the man and then the others who were watching, but most of the people who were actually there said they just saw her standin’ over the dead bodies with blood on her hands and on the weapon she was holding.”

“Could’ve been an accident,” Zidane argued. “She might have missed a shot and hurt somebody accidentally.” He cringed inwardly to hear his own

words; Zidane knew that Freya would *never* miss a shot, let alone accidentally hit others, but until everything was safe there was no way he could ask her.

“Pretty much of a damn fluke accident if you ‘accidentally’ spear seven people in the hearts dead-on,” Cinna snickered.

“Right. There goes that theory. Could the guy have been fighting with somebody else who killed the people who were watching, then ran off?”

“Not enough time, as I reckon it.”

Zidane shook his head. That particular question would have to be asked to Freya. “What about later — the riot? Who started that?”

“No name given, according to everybody, so, well, we asked around for details on what he *looks* like,” Blank spoke up gloomily. “And either this guy is really, really ugly or the different accounts don’t add up. I thought he might have been a lizard from out East, because of what they said about his skin colour, but...”

“He’s got hair,” Cinna put in. “They don’t have hair. Most probably a halfie, though lizards prefer to stay in the warm, and Treno’s colder than a witch’s

tit at this time of year compared to out east. But yeah, he had hair.”

“Loads of it. Blue, apparently.”

“Maybe he’s related to Ruby.”

“Maybe it *was* Ruby.”

“You guys are stupid,” huffed Blank, who had always had a sweet spot for the aforementioned lady. “Dark blue. Topknotted.”

“Big, too. ‘Couldn’t see him for the muscles’,” quoted Marcus.

“*I* heard he was quite lanky. And covered in scars from head to foot .”

“Uglier than a rat’s arse, too. They all agreed on *that*.”

“Speaking of rats,” Blank said slowly, “He kept on ranting and raving about Burmecians. Looked like he was doing the whole damn thing all out of the fact that your friend was from there. That’s one odd thing — hasn’t been any prejudice like that for, oh, half a century.”

“Wouldn’t be off for one of the lizards, though,” Zidane said thoughtfully. “Lizards *eat* rats. And the

scars and things would add up as well; they breed fighters.”

“I’ve never even *seen* a lizard halfie,” Cinna said, shaking his head. “Why would one suddenly stir up a riot over here? It doesn’t make any sense. Lizards don’t come over here, they don’t even trade with us, they just don’t like it.”

“Who knows?” sighed Marcus. “It’s not making any sense whatsoever. So we have a whole lot of dead people, and we have an ugly mottle— skinned lizardman who got his friend killed and blamed it all on a big Burmecian conspiracy and started a riot. It doesn’t gel together. Two totally different events.”

“Huh? Whaddya mean, ‘friend killed’?”

He blinked. “Didn’t I tell you? I got told he started the riot ‘cause Miz. Crescent killed his brother, which apparently all Burmecians do, because they’re obviously big and evil.” Marcus’ voice dripped sarcasm.

“You sound so upstanding,” Cinna grinned.

“I just think that’s idiotic. I think it doesn’t matter what skin you have, you’re still probably as much as an arse as everybody else.”

“How sweet. You should become a poet.”

“Which ‘friend’?” Zidane said urgently. “C’mon, Marcus, think.”

“I don’t know. I never got told.”

“Damn! I wish Freya was here. She could at least *tell* me. Or Amarant.” The blonde rubbed his forehead in frustration, his tail wrapping around the chairleg.

There was a tapping on his shoulder. Zidane turned around and blinked at the scruffy man at the next table, nursing a mug. “Par’n me,” the man beamed at him, “but was yoo meanin’ an Amarant of the flamin’ persuasion?”

“That’s him,” he answered genially.

“And youse his friend?”

“Ah... as much of a friend as anybody can be to Amarant,” Zidane hazarded. “Yes.”

The man nodded sagely. “Thas’ ‘im, all right. I bin listenin’ to your conversation on account of eavesdroppin’, an’ I weren’t gonna tell you nothin’, but I will ‘cause youse Amarant’s friend an’ I owe him one an’ you also look like you gots some gil.” He shone at his tact and charm.

“Come over here, neighbour,” Marcus grunted, who knew a chance when he saw one. “What’s your name?”

“Andry. You kin call me ‘Andry’.” He shuffled his chair closer.

“So, Andry, were you there that night?”

“As sure as sure can be, guv. Those poor, poor souls.” Andry made an attempt to look upset, but it didn’t quite work.

“Did you see who killed the people?” Cinna thumped his hand down on the table eagerly.

The man shook his head. “Nah, sorry. I ’rrived later.”

“What can you remember about the man who lead the riot?” Zidane pressed.

“Couldn’ see him ver’ well. Not his brother, neither.”

The Tantalus gang exchanged a look. “Brother?”

“Yeh. He was all in a snit ‘cause of that knight killin’ his brother.”

“I didn’t hear that there was a lizard among the bodies,” Marcus said slowly. “Did you see anything of the brother?”

“Well, no. He was sorta sufferin’ from a bad case of the death. That an’ he was all rolled up in black at that man’s feet.” Andry took a swig of his ale. “Shouldn’ wear black. S’bad luck, especially when you wear it all over like that.”

It took about a second for the group to gel, and then there was a clattering of chairs as they all stood up abruptly. Zidane flung some gil down on the table in haste for the man. “Thank you *very* much,” he proclaimed, and then they were gone like a flash.

Andry pocketed his gil in a huff. *Everybody* was doing that to him lately.

He couldn’t pick up the scent. There were too many Burmecians in this stinking hellhole, and if he had half a chance he’d get rid of all of the rat infestation but they were not part of the blood-pact. The Knights were part of the blood-pact, and once they were done, he could rest...

The bounty-hunters did not matter. They were all incompetent fools who couldn't catch a fish in a bucket, much less a slippery little rat who knew how to dive into a hole. They were sneaky, dishonourable bastards, and obviously Crescent was the same. She could hide, yes, she could hide, and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing because it meant that the kill would be all his own because he could find in the end, yes, she could slip into her hidey-hole but he would slip his hand in in the end... the end was near, yes, blissful end.

That thought cheered him immensely as he slipped into the shadows, away from the stinking city and into the forests and mountains he loved so well. The hunt had begun... there was just the simple matter of retrieving the quarry.

Amarant watched Freya out the corner of his eye, amused, leaning against a tree and pretending to be sound asleep in the shade. The little rat was ankle-deep at the shores of the lake, and had been amusing herself for the past ten minutes by attempting to catch a fish in her bare hands, splashing frequently in the process. Although her claws were lightning-quick, they never quite managed to spear a sprat,

which probably didn't matter to her anyway. Freya's helmet, leather bracers and coat were safely rolled up and tucked away in the rock niche in the mountain she was storing her things in — what was it with women and arranging things? — and she had taken to just wearing her light linen undertunic and loose breeches. He'd hardly recognized her at first, but then the simple reality of the fact that she was not born with the helmet wedged firmly on her head set in, and Amarant was able to look at her. She was quite pretty, really, if you liked that sort of thing, which he definitely did *not*.

What an odd first few days it had been. Freya was clearly in love with the valley, which made him oddly smug, though living with someone else there after so long of being there by himself was a thing that he hadn't expected to get used to. The conversation had also been stilted, as neither were great talkers, but soon Freya had relaxed and thus himself done the same. Neither would ever find themselves babbling like a brook to each other, but at least they could talk, and the Burmecian appeared grateful to him.

Grateful? Bah, anybody would have done it. Actually, he wasn't in the category of 'anybody', but

the fact that anybody would have done it anyway meant it was nothing special.

Amarant had forgotten the comfort of Aless. There was plenty of fish to eat and red meat if he just ventured a little way out of the valley, and although Freya forced him to cook it he didn't really miss the way he used to feed when he was young. There was plenty of running water for drinking and washing, and even shoots and vegetables (Amarant disliked them, but Freya chewed on anything, as Burmecians were wont to do). Hell, he'd eaten better than he had for weeks — slept better, too. The grass was softer than eiderdown and a small banked fire kept any chill that might have come away. They slept on either side of it, and Freya didn't even complain that he snored (which he didn't anyway, Lani was just a filthy liar).

She was a resourceful wench, too, obviously used to sleeping out in the open. Freya had managed to travel around with matches in her pockets, teabags sewn into the lining of her coat, and an entire small teapot wrapped up in a pouch. Quite obviously insane — people who enjoyed drinking leaf juices usually were — but resourceful nonetheless.

The Burmecian eventually tired of harassing the fish and came over to flop by his side. “You’re not sleeping,” she announced. “Your eyelids are shut too tightly.”

He grunted, but his mouth curved in a smirk. “Isn’t there a knightly code or something stating you’re not allowed to annoy the piss out of innocent people?”

“I wasn’t aware you came under the bracket of ‘innocent people’.”

“Touchè.” Amarant straightened up and looked down at her. “What do you want?”

“You mean I have to have a reason to be near you other than to bask in the glow of your obvious affection?”

“When did you become so charming?”

“I’ve always been funny. You just never noticed.”

“You’ve always been funny in the head, more like it.”

“You’re *cruel* at this time of day, Mr. Coral.”

He looked down at her as she crossed her legs and fiddled with a blade of grass. She practically

shone; since when had she been so carefree? A palpable aura of sadness had always surrounded Freya, but now it was stripped away and narrowed down to quiet moments and a shadow in her eyes that spoke of former tears. Maybe there was something off in her tea. “Why are *you* so happy?” he asked bluntly.

Freya shrugged honestly. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s the valley, maybe it’s because... it doesn’t seem to matter here,” she murmured wistfully.

“What not matter?”

She chose not to answer him for a while, and when she did, she brushed him off. “Never mind. Want to spar? You’re still unspeakably bad at defending yourself against polearms.”

Amarant immediately went on the defensive. “... Claws aren’t a defensive weapon. They’re a killing weapon. You’re supposed to kill your opponent before he can get a thrust in.”

“Assassination, you mean.”

“It’s what I’ve trained for.”

“Point taken.”

“What about hand-to-hand?” he taunted back. “You’re unspeakably bad at defending yourself without your spear.”

“It’s a pike — and rule one is to never go anywhere without your weapon.”

“Easier way of doing that is to make *yourself* the weapon.”

Freya looked at him, and pride would not let her admit that her hand skills were not up to scratch. “Fine. Let’s go hand-to-hand.”

Amarant looked surprised, then his face settled back in his usual apathetic mask. “That’s not a fair fight.”

“Fights aren’t usually fair, Amarant. You just have to make sure that it’s usually unfair for the other person. And I *have* trained hand-to-hand, you know. I’m a knight of Burmecia.”

He gave that rough, amused chuckle again, and stood up. “Only if you’re sure you want the bruises.”

“Try me.”

So he did, and exactly fifteen seconds later he had her pinned to the ground with his foot.

“Fine, fine! I submit!” she protested, her ego bruised more than anything else. “I’m humiliated. I cower before you. Could you let me breathe now?”

Amarant took his foot away. “It’s not that you’re not strong,” he admitted grudgingly. ‘It’s just that you don’t know how to leave your body undefended to me. I’m a monk, and you’re still acting like a knight and pretending I’m not going to go for your vitals ’cause that’s unfair. Monks *fight*, we live with our hands. You leave everything open... I’m surprised you managed to stay up that long,’ he added graciously. “Learnt your lesson?”

She sat up and dusted herself off. “Yes, actually.”

“Smart woman.”

“And I want you to teach me.”

That threw him off completely. He stared at her for a moment before raising his eyebrow in surprise. “Why?”

“You have anything better to do?”

“... well, no.”

“Done, then. We’ll train every day here; you can teach me how to avoid your attacks, I’ll teach you at least *something* about not getting caught on the end

of a pike, which would at least be more than the nothing you already know,” she added crushingly, attempting to win back lost ego.

“It’s not like I haven’t fought against pikes before,” he grunted.

“I’m an elite.”

“You speak big for somebody whose chest is smaller than my foot,” Amarant smirked unwisely.

“That’s *it*! Nobody makes quips about my *chest*!”

Amarant did eventually recover from being pushed into the lake, but only barely.

“Amarant?”

Freya had woken up to many light droplets of water falling over her body and making the fire spit. Having lived in a city where rain fell almost constantly, this did not perturb her at first, and she decided to patiently wait it out. However, waiting it out was apparently a bad idea; the light spray turned into heavy pounding droplets and the fire went out.

“Oh, Gods,” she grumbled. “I *knew* we’d need a shelter.”

Amarant woke up immediately at the sound of her voice and shook himself in disgust. “Damn. It’s not supposed to be rainy season yet.” He looked quite clearly haunted.

“Let’s move back into the pines. We can erect a shelter tomorrow.”

“No,” he said simply, shaking his head. “I’ve got somewhere.”

“Lead away.”

They walked through the insistent sheets of rain, rounding the lake, until they were hugging the wall. “Can you climb?” Amarant grunted over the noise.

“How high?”

He pointed up.

“Not in *this* weather. I wasn’t made for climbing. Should I jump?”

“You’ll never see the spot.” Before she could protest, he’d gathered her in his arms and wrapped hers securely around his neck. Freya yelped slightly as her personal space was suddenly invaded, but then clung to Amarant for dear life as he took his arms away from her and began climbing the rock face. He moved sideways so that he was climbing up

directly behind the waterfall, and the roar of water filled her ears; Amarant climbed for what felt like forever, and then he hauled himself up onto a ledge and deposited Freya safely inside a dark opening up behind the waterfall. Freya blinked, then looked inside, her eyes quickly adjusting in the dark.

The cave didn't go that far back, but it went far enough back so that there was ample space that would not get wet from the waterfall. At the very end was spread dried grass, obviously as something to lie down on. The walls had been decorated with little pictures in grey clay chalk, and something that looked very much like a crude stuffed animal made out of a leather bag and buttons rested against the wall. Amarant was very quick to shove that under some grass.

“What is this place, Amarant?” she asked finally. “Where did you find it? How long did you live here?”

The redhead looked at her for a long time. “I... grew up here, simple as that,” he stated with finality.

“No wonder,” Freya breathed. “That explains a lot. Why did you grow up *here*?”

“This is not the time or place to talk about that,” he said tightly, flopping down into the grass.

“When will it be?” Freya took her place next to him. The grass smelled vaguely musty but it was soft and dry.

“... when you beat me hand-to-hand.”

“Done.”

It rained, and she slept.

3. Beorc

Anam Cara

beorc

"Ewww," Cinna said tactfully.

The corpse's face was bloated and puffy despite the fact that the room was specially cold. It looked dead; there was nothing else one could describe it as, other than very dead. And 'ewww'.

"Well said," Marcus rumbled, looking down. He raised a lock of dank brown hair away from an ear and looked at everybody with a cocked eyebrow. "And if you'll notice, this man is fully human."

Blank examined the face closer. "When he's apparently supposed to be that guy's brother. This guy's human all through."

"But he's got enough scars for three lizards." The blonde's voice was somber and his tail whipped

around as he stared at the body. “This man’s a fighter. And an assassin.”

Cinna looked at the body again. It was swathed entirely in black, except for where they had removed the hood; Treno couldn’t bury anybody until they got the go-ahead from their mayor, as there still might be clues abound. In fact, there were most likely still clues abound — nobody had been in there yet but them to examine the body but them. Only in Treno would such a man cause no suspicion; just passed off as another thief, another layabout.

“Don’t you think that’s a *little* obvious?” he grunted. “Scars, black clothing — wouldn’t trust it. Murderer, yeah, but assassin... stretching there.”

“I have a hunch,” Zidane said grimly and began rifling through the clothes of the corpse with catlike delicacy.

“I *hate* it when he says he has a hunch,” the redhead complained, adjusting his bandanna.

“Remember the last time he said he had a hunch?”

“How could I forget? My stomach won’t ever be the same.”

“*You* weren’t the one who had to eat that tree.”

“Whiners,” Zidane said absently, searching for pockets, face twisting in a grimace. He’d never liked corpses. Could deal with them, certainly, but like them, never.

“Found anything yet?” Cinna said hopefully. “Preferably a lot of gil and a letter saying, ‘I was out to kill her and I’m gonna take out a lot of bystanders with me’?”

There was a clink of metal as Zidane drew out a pouch from a fold of cloth near the man’s chest. It was bloodied from the spear-wound at his heart.

The red-faced little actor beamed. “Am I psychic or what? I should start up a business reading those wosname cards those women read. You know, the ones who tart ‘emselves up with too much makeup and wear dresses that shove up their chests and call themselves ‘Madame Zolta’ and charge fifty gil a pop —”

“Shut *up*, Cinna,” Blank snapped, his eyes on the pouch. “You’d need more than makeup to get anybody near you labelled ‘Madame Zolta’.”

Zidane emptied the pouch into his hand with a happy tinkle of metal. There were ten fifty-gil pieces

and a crinkled, folded-up piece of paper.

The Tantalus boys crowded around, looking over his shoulder.

“Nodune — Treno, month of melting, fifty gil now, fifty gil later. Fail — skull as new necklace. Roghn.”

There was a pause whilst Zidane crumpled the note up carefully and put it in his pocket.

“Right,” he said finally. “We have a name. We have the damn evidence. All we need is something to really back it up with. I want you guys all through Treno, *now!*”

“Since when did he become so bossy?” Marcus grumbled, moving out the door.

“It’s the queening,” Cinna said wisely. “Women’s turned the man’s brain.”

“What was that, my faithful comrade?”

“I’m leaving, I’m leaving!”

Zidane uncrumpled the note and stared at it for a long time. If only these idiots were just that much stupider to say more! One hundred gil to take Freya out... Was her life so worthless? Suddenly he felt

angry and the paper was pressed almost to tearing point within his hands. Zidane *hated* having no leg to stand on, and in this situation, he was out of control. Who was Roghn and this dead man Nodune, and why did they want Freya's death? Contemptuously, he tucked the gil back in the man's pocket. He could have his blood money; it was the most he deserved after dying this way.

With a sigh, he left the morgue even more confused than before, but more determined than ever.

Rohgn followed the tracks until he felt melted with exhaustion, frustrated and murderous, slumping against a tree and snapping off a twig to chew. He could have followed a Burmecian — any Burmecian — for days on end, their tracks as familiar to him as the back of his hand, their scent like his breath; but his own scent kept on getting in the way and confusing him.

He sighed and leant back against the tree, breathing in and out slowly. Had to clear his head, otherwise it would take far too long; this mission would need guile as well as tracking skills. When he

was done? Then the bitch's coat would run red with her own blood rather than everybody else's. He was doing Gaia a favour.

What could lead him to his prey, in enough time for him to take the role of owl and his quarry to end their life in a small damp squeak?

His lips curved. Maybe not a *what*.

He'd awoken with the dawn, as was his wont, to climb above the waterfall and clamber to the rocks there to watch the sun rise. Just as it had stained the skies blood-red with deepening pinks and oranges, he was rather surprised to see Freya clamber up beside him, drying her hair with her hands that had been dampened by the waterfall. Her normally sleek hair was windblown and mussed from sleep, her eyes bleary, the tunic she'd slept in crumpled; she smelt of the old hay they'd slept in and she really quite honestly resembled little of the battle-ready creature who wore the crimson helmet. For reasons he would never know, he quite liked her this way — he told himself it was because with her looking like that he'd never be short of a laugh.

Freya stretched luxuriously and gave a blissful sigh as she surveyed the sunlit valley, the dark trees slightly foggy with the rising dew, the morning making everything rose-tinged. “Fair takes your breath away,” she murmured wistfully. “Didn’t you hate to leave it?”

“You’re probing again,” he grunted. “Who said I left it?”

“Well, obviously, you were in Treno. And who can blame me for probing?”

“Me.”

“It’s like your jaw’s stapled shut.”

“I haven’t seen *you* blabbing out every sordid detail of your history.”

“It was not sordid!”

“Oh. Don’t want to hear it, then.”

She gave him a cuff on the ear. He growled and caught her hand, but it was only slightly in annoyance; Amarant had learned to take Freya’s jibes with at least good humour, now, though he was always a little nervy whenever somebody started touching him. In the last ten years of his books,

‘touching’ meant ‘I’m going to knock your block off.’

“Did you mean it?” Freya asked, after a while. He always took a little while to answer her questions, preferring to listen to her voice before he fully took in her words; at first he had called her accent poncy but in conjunction with her low, buttery voice it was more ‘cultured’. Amarant caught this thought on it’s way careening around in his brain and took out the time to quell it — he was doing far too much learning and adapting to Freya recently. Wistfully he remembered the time when he thought that she was a stiff-necked snobbish bitch who needed a good whack around the head — and he was prepared to give her one.

Damn the little ingratiating Burmecian! She was too much like Lani for her own good.

“Amarant? Away with the fairies, there.”

“Oh. Hmph. Mean what?”

“You wanted to know my history.”

“I already know it. It’s like those stories I used to get told as a child. You’ve already had your happily-ever-after. What’s there to know?” He knew he was being deliberately callous, but for some reason, he

usually despised listening about Fratley. Something just rang wrong with him about the man.

She drew her brows together and scowled darkly down at the crashing waterfall, eyes blazing, not quite angry but definitely directly unhappy at something; however, after a few moments Freya shook her head and the expression dropped. “Don’t want the wind to change.”

“Eh? What the *hell*?”

“Wind to change. Haven’t you ever heard the expression?”

“Never in my entire bloody life.” Amarant was glad the subject had changed.

“If the wind changes whilst you screw up your face, it stays that way.” She looked at his stupefied expression and began to laugh. “Don’t look so stunned about it. It isn’t true... though it would explain your looks.”

Amarant grunted. “You’re just asking me to pull your tail.”

“Do, and get my pike where you may not like it.”

He stood up and stretched. The dawn had broken now, the clouds scattered into a deepening blue sky,

the bird chorus in full throat down in the trees. "... I'm gonna go catch something for breakfast, then send one of those damned moogles to Zidane. Go make a fire."

Freya stood with him and bowed gracefully. "Why, of *course*, your Amarantship. Would you like me to knit you a pair of socks whilst I'm at it?"

"No. Don't wear socks," he said graciously.

"Evil drahkenspawn," she spat laughingly, and with a bound leaped off the steep side of the rocks, down past the waterfall to land with a thump in the earth below.

Amarant paused for a moment, then shrugged. Deciding to forget the matter he crawled back over the rocks and down into the forest outside Aless.

"Milady?"

Garnet looked up from the sheaf of papers she was reading in surprise and rubbed her forehead. "Beatrix? What's wrong?"

The lovely brunette knight was frowning slightly, lips pursed together as if she disapproved. "A

Burmecian man is here to see you. He was going to come in directly, but I stopped him. I don't really know how he got in, but he goes by the name of Fratley —”

“Send him in, send him in!” she urged. “Go on, Beatrix, do.” She stood up and quickly brushed her plain copper-coloured gown off and sighed, knowing she looked an absolute fright; ever since Zidane had gone away she was up in the tiny hours of the night, and black rings surrounded her eyes.

“Your Highness.” Fratley walked through the doors with the utter unselfconscious grace that seemed to possess all Burmecians, and bowed low. “I hope I find you well?”

She nodded at him gently, noting as well the fine lines of worry around the man's eyes, half-hidden by the brim of his hat and locks of brown hair. “As well as can be expected, Sir Fratley. Won't you sit down? Would you like a drink?”

He sat down in the chair offered, and she sat opposite. “Thank you, but no. I ate on the way, your Majesty.”

“Call me Garnet, sir. Or Dagger — mostly everybody does nowadays, and I feel we're going to

have to spend some time together over this.”

“As you please, lady Dagger.”

“Well, then.” She smiled. “Down to the heart of the matter.”

“Yes.” He bowed his head, then, and suddenly she felt incredibly sorry for him. “It is with the utmost importance that we find Freya and her assassin, whomever it may be, for both political safety and the personal safety of Freya herself.”

“Yes. That is of the utmost importance. I think that we should locate the assassin before we find Freya, though; she is in safe hands, at least.” He looked like he wanted to ask a question, but he kept his tongue. “Zidane has located some evidence down in Treno, and he is following it up, but I’d like to ask you some questions.”

Fratley shifted in his chair, the spear strapped to his back being moved to a more comfortable position. “Ask away, lady Dagger.”

“Who other than you knew that Freya was going to be in Treno?”

He suddenly looked even more uncomfortable than he already was, staring straight past her

shoulder, keeping quiet for two more beats than needed to think. “Nobody knew that Freya was going to be in Treno, my lady, or in any country other than Burmecia.”

“Pardon?” His face grew red beneath the short soft fur on his face, and she grimaced. “I don’t mean to pry, Sir Fratley, but why?”

“... She mentioned she needed some time to herself, but did not mention where she was going.” He paused, and his mellifluous voice grew softer, with a tone to it that made Garnet’s heart ache in sympathetic pain. “I do not think she wanted me to know where she was going.”

What could one say to that? ‘I’m sorry’ was too trite for words, and to gloss over it would be callous. “I know she loves you, Sir Fratley.”

“Yes... she does indeed love Fratley, very much indeed.” The words were heartening, but his face and voice were blank. However, as if embarrassed, he immediately changed the subject. “Where is Freya’s whereabouts? King Puck is very concerned about her personal safety, especially in light of the recent murders.”

“The murders at Treno?”

He shook his head. “Nay, lady Dagger. Recently, it has been discovered that a few retired knights scattered over Burmecia have been slaughtered. They were quite obviously murdered, and with the loss of the last few dragon knights, my entire country is in mourning. Since the Dragon Wars, we have had a very low knight count, but with the loss of these knights we are dwindling in a frightening manner.”

Garnet sat stunned. This made the attempt an entirely new game. “Do you think the murderer is the same that attempted to end Freya’s life?”

“Yes. The times certainly coincide. The last murder — one sir Surt, living out in the foothills — was found dead, having died a week before Freya left Burmecia.”

“And they have all been dragon knights?”

“Aye, lady Dagger.”

She pondered this for a few moments, her hands twisting in her lap. “You had better watch your own back, Fratley. As of right now, you and Freya are some of the last left, I’d imagine.”

“For some reason, my lady, I do not fear for my own life. I have been watching out these past few

weeks, and although on many occasions there has been ample opportunity to kill me, it has not been done. I believe that the murderer is still after Freya. Where is she?" he asked again, gently persistent.

"I don't know," Garnet confessed. "Amarant Coral — a friend of ours — took her into hiding and he refuses to say where for safety reasons. He's promised to keep in touch through the moogles, though, and we await more messages."

"Amarant?"

"A compatriot of ours for a while. He helped us in our quest. He and Freya seemed to get on quite well."

"Aye, I know the name — Freya spoke of him — he just does not seem the type to offer assistance..." His face suddenly clouded over. "Do you not think perhaps it is a ploy —"

"No," Garnet said firmly. "I know Amarant. He would never doublecross Freya like that. Don't even suggest it."

He pinched his temples and sighed. "I am so sorry, lady Dagger. Please forgive my paranoia. In these dark days I would stoop to any level if just to find my lady."

Her heart was immediately sore again. Garnet remembered the endless months fearing Zidane was dead and never to return, and even worse, the secret voice in the back of her heart that told her that he just did not want to be near her.

“We’ll get Freya back,” she comforted him. “The moment Amarant sends us a message, we’ll pass it on to you. In the meanwhile, will you do me the honour of staying here for the present?”

Fratley nodded. “As long as you need me, lady Dagger.”

“Good.” She stood up and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Don’t fear, sir Fratley. I know how you feel, and I think that soon this will all be put behind us.”

He looked up at her and she had to listen very hard to him saying under his breath, “That is what I fear.”

Freya’s first sparring lesson with Amarant had been quite a shock. They’d chosen a flat area of grass around the lake to practice on, but when she turned to go and retrieve her armour, he stopped her.

“That’s not how you learn,” he said firmly. “No armour. In fact, no clothes. Strip.”

“WHAT!”

The redhead busily shed himself of his vest and pants and cords, and Freya attempted not to look like a doe faced with a crossbow as a sea of rippling green muscles was revealed. He noticed her staring and put his clothes to one side, left in just a loincloth. “Don’t look so stricken, woman. You’re wearing bindings and a cloth, aren’t you? I’d make you take off the bindings, but —”

“But never in your *wildest* dreams,” Freya intoned darkly, face on fire, pulling her tunic over her head to reveal her lithe body. They were as different in body structure as chalk and cheese; he was stocky and she willowy.

Amarant laughed crudely. “Not in my dreams. I prefer my women busty — and preferably drunk.”

She stripped off her breeches and stood defiantly in front of him, as if daring him to comment. Seemingly oblivious to the fire in her eyes, he walked around her, inspecting her form. “Not bad,” he commented.

“Amarant Coral, you are *immensely* lucky I don’t have my —”

“I meant your muscles, chit. As for the rest of it —” He let his eyes rove over her again. “You need some feeding up. Too skinny.”

Her gaze might have lowered the temperature of the Ice Cave.

Yes, the first lesson had been quite a fright to both of them. At first, Amarant had been able to floor her in twenty seconds flat. He used the most *dreadful* techniques, and grabbed her in places that chilled her to the bone with embarrassment; however, when she complained, he hook his head. “You’re not supposed to be fighting prettily. You’re fighting to stay alive. Fight *dirty*. You’ve got claws there — use ’em.”

Thusly, Freya had almost won her fifth match by tugging out a lock of his hair and kneeing him in the groin. He’d congratulated her — once he got over writhing around on the ground and whimpering darkly something to the point of, “I’m going to wring your... wretched little neck... when I get up.”

After that, she really quite enjoyed it.

Living with Amarant was... critically different to any way she'd ever lived her life before. It was composed of rituals, and an odd technique of giving space whilst keeping close; never once did he get on her nerves just by being there (though it was quite easy for him to get on her nerves when he opened his mouth). He demanded nothing of her, when she demanded everything of him; companionship and trust. His cooking and his communication were atrocious, but Freya was working on the latter when the two sat down in long, companionable silences. It was so easy to talk without words, she'd learnt. Saying Amarant never talked was a rampant lie — he could say more with a look than many people could in fifty words.

... Fratley had been the same...

Had been.

She knew him now, enjoyed being around him, enjoyed getting up to watch the dawn, enjoyed wrinkling her nose when presented with a *very* rare haunch of some animal he'd hunted outside of the valley.

They'd never gotten around to erecting a shelter. They just shared the cave. They shared mostly everything, except bathing times, although there had

been some close embarrassments in that respect. It was just a matter of learning to vacate the area.

Carefully checking that Amarant was sound asleep in the still of the night, Freya wrapped the brief cloth she used for towelling herself down around her body and stood up quietly. Ever cynical about all matters mystical, there were just some things she could not share with him, and the full moon was one of them. He would not understand why her eyes got dreamy around the rise of the moon, and he would quite not understand why she had to go and do what she was about to go and do.

Freya climbed carefully down the slick rock behind the waterfall and moved out into the open, looking up at the glorious full disc sailing the cloudless skies, lighting up the valley with pale light. She could understand why Amarant called it heaven — the waterfall and the water sparkled with such beauty that it brought a lump to her throat. Maybe she was oversentimental because of the night it was; Burmecians were closer to the turning of the seasons and the waxing and the waning of the moon than most of the other races, and she knew that mostly every other Burmecian woman under this sky would be doing much the same as she did now.

She dropped the cloth on the bank and walked naked into the water, breaking off the soaproot that grew between the wet rocks. Freya pounded it between her hands until it gave off the desired lather and washed herself from head to toe, shedding the dirt that came from living out in the open, blissfully purifying herself. The soaproot was easily rinsed off afterwards underneath the waterfall, and after that she sat on a rock out of the water and combed her claws through her hair until it was no longer tangled. It lay on her shoulders in long burnished-silver locks, slicked to her head.

The night air was cool and the water had been chilling, so drying merely with the wind was out of the question; Freya stood up and delicately picked her way over to the bank.

The Burmecian frowned. Either she hadn't placed her cloth where she thought she'd placed it, or —

“Looking for this?”

Freya immediately turned her body away, until she noticed that Amarant had his eyes screwed shut. She snatched the brief cloth away and held it to her, panting with fright. “What are you *doing* down here?”

“The cave was empty. Obviously, I wondered if you’d been murdered or something.” There was a slight tremor in his voice and his eyes were still screwed shut.

“You can look now,” she snapped. “I’m decent.”

Amarant opened his eyes and took one look at the scrap of cloth, then looked away pointedly. Oddly enough, that angered her more than if he had been leery.

“For the love of the gods,” she said shortly. ‘You see this little when we’re wrestling. Why such a prude?’ A thought struck her. “Am I so ugly?”

“Probably,” he responded, just as curt. “I haven’t looked yet.”

That stung. “Then maybe you *should* so we can clear the matter up.” She let the cloth drop, managing to keep her dignity and the urge to immediately turn away.

He turned his head back, obviously about to say something, but his eyes froze on her body. Amarant remained stock-still in the moonlight, like a statue, and she felt herself begin to shiver from the cold... or maybe from her moontime. Damn! Why did he have to catch her?

“It shouldn’t matter anyway,” she heard herself saying. “After all, you like your women buxom...”

Freya felt her chin being cupped in his hand, not necessarily gently, and a very angry Amarant look into her eyes. “What are you trying to pull?” he hissed. “What do you *want*?”

She suddenly felt all the resolve leak out of her and a terrible guilt sink in. What was she doing? There was a name for what she had just done, and it wasn’t a pretty one. And to Amarant, too... dear gods!

“I want to go back to bed,” she whispered, trying to take her eyes away from his. ‘I want... I want to go back to Burmecia. I want Fratley back,’ she confessed in a rush, voice breaking. “I don’t have a happy ending — I was in Treno because I’d left him. Gods, I’d give anything to have him back, *anything*! I couldn’t take it any more... him there, but like a zombie, not like... I just...”

To her dim horror, she felt herself move forward, and a very taken— aback Amarant slid to the ground with her as she buried her head in his shoulder. Then he watched in utter astonishment, the anger melting out of him, as she finally wept in his arms for the lover that, for her, had died a very long time ago.

Eventually she fell asleep in his arms, having cried herself into a stupor, and Amarant gently disentangled her body from his without thinking too much about what he was touching. Then, after retrieving a blanket from the niche where she kept her armour, he draped it over her.

“Stupid little chit,” he muttered, full of pity with a slight touch of wistfulness. “Must be bad if you tried to turn to *me* for goddamn comfort.”

Then, merely out of habit because he’d done it every other night before, he sat down and watched her sleep.

4. Nied

Anam Cara

nied

"I got your note."

It was the weakest opening Zidane had ever begun with, but he was momentarily startled with the appearance of Amarant melting out of the forest. He looked one with the shadows in the dusk, and Zidane had to look hard to see where the forest began and the big man ended; he stayed perfectly still, head slightly bowed, and where his vision lay only he could tell.

"Obviously," the rumble came, acid-bitten with sarcasm. "That little piece of white fluff's got to be half-competent, or he'll end up in my cooking fire."

Zidane ignored that. "Speaking of cooking, do you and Freya have enough to eat?"

The long, rangy jaw grew set, offended. “Hmph. You think I’d bring her out into nowhere to starve?”

Both stood on the outskirts of the forest of ‘Dalina’, a forest that, quite obviously, supplied Dali with her lumber. (The simple countryfolk weren’t exactly noted for their wild creativity.)

He raised his hands in protest. “I didn’t say that, man. It’s just that food can be scarce up at this time of year, and I can get you supplies.”

“We don’t need food.” The utterance was final.

“Freya’s probably running out of tea, though.”

That brought an amused chuckle from Amarant, who folded his arms and leant against a tree. “... yes, tea. She’s taken to drinking hot boiled water and it’s just pissing me off. I’ll reimburse you. And maybe another tunic — if her old one gets any more ragged I’ll have to move away just to give her some privacy.”

Zidane tried to hide a smile. “Anything else?”

“Chocolate. She talks about it incessantly and I just want to shut her up.”

“Nothing for yourself?”

He grunted. "I don't need it."

"I'll get it in Dali and bring it back to you. Ah, speaking of which, let's get down to business..." Zidane nochalantly copied Amarant's pose, bracing his back against a tree. "How is Freya? You didn't bring her."

"She's fine. Annoying, but fine. I want her out of my hair. Haven't you found that bedamned murderer yet?"

"It would help if we could actually talk to Freya for a description. The only stuff we have is just guesswork. Hell, I don't even know what happened that night."

"..." The redhaired man looked away for a moment, then began to recite from memory. "Freya was attacked in the middle of the street. He disarmed her, then he used his own weapon to kill some people around them. Then she killed him. End of story."

"Did she say anything about the man?"

"Yeah — he wore all black."

"Yes!" Zidane exulted. "That's perfect!" Pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were slotting in. That man

Nodune had been sent to kill her. Now it was just a question of why he'd been sent and who had sent him. That blue-haired man — what part did he play in this tableau?

“What else is there?”

Right to the point. Zidane pulled through his memory what was happening; the Tantalus gang still in Treno, his love and Fratley in Alexandria Castle
—

“Dagger sends both of you her love —” Amarant snorted “— and... um...” Zidane pulled a piece of paper out of his sleeve. “Fratley has this note for Freya.”

The blonde watched him uneasily, tail twitching, as Amarant looked at the paper like it was poison. Finally, he tucked it into his vest.

“Anything else?” he asked again, and his voice was like lead now.

“Just look after yourself. I’m pretty sure you’re safe — you and Freya are so well-protected nobody could track you here — but just don’t take risks, okay? I’m gonna nail this bastard.”

Amarant trudged back off into the forest before stopping and looking over his shoulder, night falling all around him. “I get first dibs.”

“I’ll give you your supplies tomorrow.”

He disappeared into the encroaching dark, and for the longest time, Zidane stayed in his place to watch the trees in darkness.

“Drahken-den, ueber den g’unen klie loebn —”

Tradition sustained him, supported the muscles and the bones that had only one will to live. If it had not been for the pact he would have rotted away long ago from sheer unrivalled misery. He took a peculiar joy in being the last to praise the drahkenden.

“— Ise leigt iem bloet —”

Maybe years ago he would have questioned, but when there was nothing left but prayers, he turned gladly to them.

“— die basrii geftzahn...”

Too much time was being wasted, and time was not a thing that could be easily retrieved. He heard screams from every rock and every blade of grass that he passed by, calling for blood, and he would not linger when he could give it to them.

“...avenghu du drahen.”

He'd spent countless times on that piece of flimsy, writing the message over and over until the little basket that kept rubbish was teeming over with paper beginning, 'Freya — '. Fratley had agonized, angered, pored deeply over the message that he had sent with Zidane, and when the tailed blonde had come back with tidings of his lost love, he had felt like weeping with relief.

Fratley had felt an innumerable sense of guilt over the whole business — what had driven Freya away? Did he not love her enough? Did he love her too much? Was he so appalling now that he could not remember his mother's face? Small flashes sometimes came back to him, vague and frustrating — tearing his old yellow coat into a thin ribbonlike strip, for example, if he concentrated he could still feel the texture between his claws; yet he could not

remember anything useful, such as meeting Freya for the first time, or even meeting her to go on his quest.

He knew her, though. Something drew him inexplicably to her, like sunset drawing into night; an invisible tie that bound him to her. Fratley could not quite classify it as love, but there was something deeper there that could not be named. For her sake he would delve all his life to try and illustrate that feeling.

Freya was owed that much... so much. More than he could give. Years and years' worth of blood and tears — how could he repay her that?

“My lady Garnet.”

She turned around, the petite, exquisite figure bathed in the sunlight from the window she had been pondering. Dagger blushed, embarrassed that she had been caught daydreaming and not working. “Sir Fratley?”

The Burmecian dragoon bowed stiffly, spear bound once more to the strap on his back. “Milady... your hospitality has warmed me to the core, but with the news of Lady Freya that your Zidane sent back, I can wait no longer.”

Garnet nodded softly. *“You miss her. I can understand that much.”* A wan smile passed over her lips. *“I’m jealous; if I could leave my crown and go running after Zidane I would, but you at least have the freedom to take to the road. Are you going to track her and Amarant?”*

“As best I can. I’m no master tracker, but at the moment, I feel I could find Freya even if she were ten million leagues away. I would not in any good faith be a detriment to her safety, but at the moment I fear for her life.”

She laughed ruefully. “I wish you luck, then. Meet up with Zidane on the way and tell him your intentions; I’ll contact Puck to tell him where you are. And keep yourself safe.”

“Do not worry about me, lady Garnet. I can take care of myself.”

“Now you sound like Zidane. Only more cultured. Just watch yourself! Freya would never forgive me if I let you walk off into a trap.”

Fratley had to bite back a mournful ‘I wonder’, and merely nodded. “Yes. Fare thee well, Garnet.”

“Goodbye, Fratley.”

She watched him walk off into the dusk and then sat down, once again, to write a letter. Dagger sighed. So many letters! The moogles must be getting aggravated. I know my wrist is.

He crept up on her just mainly because he'd never seen her look surprised, or managed to creep up really on her before. He walked more silent than silence itself, feet making all the noise of a cat's footfall —

“Hello, Amarant,” she said wryly, turning around, but there was a big smile on her face. Apparently her self-imposed silence after what he had privately called That Damned Water Incident had ebbed, and she was old Freya again, sardonic with a smile. “If your feet stamped any louder they would hear you over in Lindblum.”

The redhead pushed the leather sack he had slung over his shoulder heavily to the ground, and she sat down next to it curiously, laying down her spear.

“I bagged some stuff from Zidane,” he grunted in explanation, secretly pleased she wasn't pretending to be an ice princess any more. “Got some crap for you, if you're interested.”

“With that cultured, polite invitation, how could I resist?”

“...” He rolled his eyes and undid the neck of the bag. “An extra blanket — didn’t ask for that. You have it. And... here’s some other stuff,” Amarant said smoothly, casually, dumping it into her lap and waiting for the reaction.

She didn’t disappoint. “Oh! Tea! How did you know to ask for tea, Amarant?”

“It was a hunch. That and the bitching.”

“Would you be a dear and come over here so I can hit you? Oh! A tunic!”

“Your old one’s looking sort of... ragged,” Amarant said politely. Ragged was an understatement. If it got any more holes and bits ripped off, she’d be walking around in her bindings, and even they were starting to look a bit worse for wear.

“And what’s this?” She carefully took out a wrapped package, peeked inside, then opened her eyes wide and began to laugh. “Chocolate. I’m living in the lap of luxury! You’re psychic, I swear, my friend.” In a display of affection she flung her arms around his neck in a simple hug.

He blushed, torn between disentangling her and letting it rest, then he finally realized he was blushing and gruffly set her down to hide it. “Damnit, woman. Stop being so clingy.”

The Burmecian woman just smiled, able to translate by now. “Thanks, Amarant. This means a lot to me.”

“Wouldn’t give a damn if it didn’t. Oh...” Amarant pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. ‘Zidane gave this for you.’ His rough voice quietened. “It’s from ass — Fratley.”

Freya grabbed the paper crisply and stood up, abruptly walking a way a few paces, clutching the piece of flimsy in her hands and staring at it. Amarant waited patiently, pulling up a long piece of reedgrass and chewing on it idly, waiting for her to finish. She suddenly bared her teeth in a great display of ferocity and balled the paper up, flinging it as hard as she could to melt in the water of the lake, breathing harshly and wringing her hands. When her irrational rage was over, she fished the piece of now very soggy paper out the water and left it quietly on the bank.

“I want to spar.”

He raised an eyebrow at her patiently.

“Now. Hand-to-hand.” She was stripping out of her clothes as she talked, the ragged tunic landing in a heap near the tree, leather breeches being pushed down those supple legs. “Get undressed.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said mockingly, moving the leather bag out of the way on the grassy bank, clearing the space for them and pushing off his vest. “Just promise you won’t take advantage of me.”

She flashed him a dark look, but found nothing exceptionally mocking in his eyes. Amarant wouldn’t stoop that low. “No,” she said slowly, a lopsided smile gracing her mouth. “Apparently I like my men smaller — and amnesiacs.”

He stared at her then, and she couldn’t see his eyes through his thick ropy curtain of flaming hair, but it was piercing all the same. “I’m not going to fight with you if you’re half-hysterical.”

“I’m not half-hysterical.”

“You’re trembling.”

“Just fight me, damnit! Fight me now or I’m just going to run out of this valley and scream, ‘Take me now’ and murderer be damned!”

“Freya.” He stood in front of her, stripped down for sparring, and his voice had dropped to a note so low it almost reverberated in the earth. “You’re being irrational.”

“I don’t care. Oh, Gods, I don’t care any more. I’m sick of caring.” Something burned in her eyes hot enough to melt metal and he almost took a step back. She wasn’t irrational at all; she was a seasoned warrior, and she could focus her anger into her fighting and still keep her mind impassionate. Damn! One moment mellow, now — this! “If you have any compassion, spar.”

He opened his palms, washing his hands of any responsibility, and nodded.

Immediately she came at him, so quickly and moving with such fluid grace that he almost didn’t know what to do — almost. In the last moment he smoothly flung her up into the air behind him, over his shoulder, wanting her to land heavy on the grass; however, she had other ideas. Amarant had given her a leg-up, and she somersaulted up in the air and kicked him in the back of the head with one of her powerful legs before he’d even known what hit him.

He fell forward, but rolled out of the way before she could latch onto him, and was up on his feet and moving back in a second. Freya moved at him blocked his barrage of blows; the only one that could connect was a rather hefty blow to her cheek, but she seemed to ignore the pain and aim painful jabs with her claws at his unprotected chest. Both jumped back at the same time, but she circled around him, strong legs tensing up. Amarant stayed rooted to the spot, knowing he could fend off an attack better if he had a fortified stance.

No attack came, and he looked around blankly. The Burmecian woman was nowhere to be seen.

Damn! The little rat had jumped! She'd never done that before — never even tried it — and Amarant had no idea how on earth she was going to use it to her advantage. That was bad.

Then Amarant made his fatal mistake; he kept his head up, looking at the sky. All the breath was knocked out of him when she came at his back, the claws that she had on her toes slamming and penetrating painfully, making him hit the turf — hard. He immediately tried to slam her backwards and they wrestled on the ground, rolling all over the place.

Finally Freya gave the upper hand, decisively straddled him, and gave him a mighty smack in the cheek. He could have handled it had she not dug in painfully with her claws, and Amarant gasped out his pain, flinching; she took the advantage of spreading out over his body, slamming his wrists down into the grass, panting with the effort of keeping him down. After an immense final power struggle from him, he fell limply to the ground, absolutely stunned.

“Yala, den, rin,” he muttered, bloodied and battered from the extremely short-lived, mean fight. “Mercy.”

All the fight seemed to go out of her after that, and she stared down at her claws. Blood stained them; Amarant’s.

“Gods, Amarant,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry. I beserked. I wanted to win so badly I hurt you.”

“Why did you want to win?” He didn’t feel like moving yet.

“Because... because... I don’t know. I just... I didn’t want to lose.” She seemed at a loss for words, and pushed her hair back self-consciously, rolling

off his prone body painfully. Red stained the pristine silver; she'd suffered a minor wound at her hairline.

“Good enough excuse for me. You won. Fair fight.”

Freya rolled over and pulled her old tunic finally to pieces, limping slightly over to the water and dampening it. She collapsed on her knees next to him and began dabbing at the cuts.

“Ow. Ow. Shit. I know I have a potion around here somewhere...”

“Just let me get all the blood off first.” Her hands were ruthlessly gentle, mopping away the dust and the pain, but her voice shook slightly. “You can tell me your history as I mop you up. I won that much.”

His blood ran cold as he remembered his promise, made on a rainy night. “... damnit, Freya... you don't want to know. Tell me you don't want to know.”

“I want to know, Amarant.”

“Never breathe a word of this to another living soul. Or a dead one either.” He sat up with the intensity of it, and looked straight up into her face

for the first time; the hair fell away from his eyes, and she stared. They were earthy brown, piercing, warm and cold and a million other different contrasting things all in once glance. Amarant eyes.

She nodded, her throat closed up, and the water dripping over her wrists.

Finally, he slumped back, closed his earthbrown eyes and sighed, both of them sitting on the shore close to the shifting water and the wind that graced the Aless lake. “Listen once and listen well, Crescent, ’cause I’m not gonna tell you again.”

She listened.

I was born somewhere on a mountain, don’t ask me where, because I sure as hell don’t know. I lived there with my mother and my father and my family and all the other families that lived on the mountain because there were a lot of us, we were a clan — a tribe! I still can’t remember how many of us there were but there were a lot. I guess we were the only ones of our kind up there because I’m damned if I’ve ever seen another outside of that mountain.

Amarant Coral isn't my real name. Well, it is, but it isn't — you wouldn't be able to pronounce it if I told you. No, don't even try, woman. You haven't got the throat for it. S'alamant. S'alamant aut Koralle. No, put some more K into it... yeah, that's close enough, I suppose. See? You sound like you're trying to hack something up. I told you you wouldn't get it... what? It means... well, it's a type of lizard, but it's also a type of plant... anyway, it doesn't matter. I made it easier to say later on.

I was really young when we started dying. I don't even remember my father. He was one of the first to go... not like I care if I can't even remember. We were getting killed off, picked off... we were a strong people but they were stronger.

Basrii. They were called basrii. Shh.

My mother told me they were demons; they just murdered us freely and when there were no warriors left they invaded where we lived. I never saw one in my life, but I'd probably know one if I saw one... not that I ever want to. They're killers, worse than murderers. Probably ate our damned babies, that's how low they were.

My mother and I were the only ones to survive. She took me away from there and we travelled,

travelled forever, I think we might have even gone over a sea but I barely remember any of it. Too young, I guess.

... her name was Damheano. Dah-mhy-e'ano. Look, Freya, don't even try. You sound like a moogles being goddamned ill.

She was a warrior and she was a tracker and when she saw this place we settled here. It wasn't supposed to be for so long, but Aless was so beautiful and so peaceful after what had happened we just sat here in the end.

Yeah... it means heaven. Don't ask, it's just stupid anyway...

I grew up... she taught me how to fight and we lived here together about six years. After that... well, she'd always meant to go back but she never made it. The winters here are bitter and her blood was used to the warmth of that mountain. She's buried somewhere over by the left side of the wall.

... don't be sorry. I'm not. After a while she was just so goddamned sick she couldn't handle breathing any more. It snows here in winter... got into her lungs. Got into mine too but I was young and I could take it.

I stayed here for another bunch of years, and then I couldn't stand it any more either and got up and left. I searched for another couple of years for the mountain I'd grown up on — just to see whether there was anyone left — but I never could find it.

I was... hell, I don't know. A couple of years younger than Zidane used to be? I hung around in some villages, doing odd jobs, picking up the odd bit of gil, getting by. I usually got kicked out for brawling; I picked fights because I wanted to smash people's faces in before they laughed at me for what I was. Then I just travelled to another village...

... lonely? Maybe...

Anyway, that continued 'till I was a bit older... then I got a job as a guard for the auction house and you know what happened there...

Then I met Lani. We took on bounty-hunting jobs together and we worked pretty well as a team — made quite a bit of money, too, and we were the best in a few damn years. And we got ordered to go after Zidane and stuff by the Queen and it was worth a lot of money and hell... you know the rest of it. I met Zidane again, and all the rest of 'em, and you...

Heh, heh. Meeting you. You pissed me off.

... thanks. I'm sure it was mutual.

Afterwards they sat in a long beautiful silence, drinking it in, and before either of them knew what had happened he'd fallen asleep in her lap. She gloried in it, his vulnerability, and for a long time Freya stroked his hair quietly and eventually lay back herself, careful not to disturb him.

(“Don't deny you love it when I sleep in your lap, when you brush my hair — you get all maternal and you get that silly smile on your face. You'll make a grand mother one day, Frey.”)

The memory hit her so suddenly she almost wept at the thought, but there had been too much weeping that day. That note... that damned note! Freya usually prided herself on keeping a cool head and very rarely getting noticeably angry, but that note had rubbed her up entirely the wrong way. Aless had had no memories of Fratley; when that note arrived, it just desecrated the entire thing. Gods, that letter...!

'Dear Freya... I don't know what I did to drive you away yet... I hope and pray you'll give me one

more chance. I... miss you very much — I do not think you can contemplate how much — ’

(Miss me? You dare to claim I do not understand the concept of absence? YOU?)

Freya was glad that the note was dying slowly, wasting on the bank. Glad that the ink was soggy and smeared. Wished that as it died so could the betraying memories.

Better not to think any more... and keep the sorrow for outside the rocky walls. A place so beautiful did not deserve the decaying thoughts inside her brain.

Her friend's head was warm, cradled in her hips, coarse red hair spilling over her stomach. Freya smiled briefly, hoping Amarant would forgive her for the bruises that would mar his skin, and soon drifted the same way he did.

Mook was sitting quite happily on a log, sorting out his letters. He'd been given a special job now by the Queen of Alexandria herself — cripes! — to deliver letters back and forth from Mr. Coral and Mr.

Tribal. His mother was in paroxysms of delight and was claiming her son would be the next mailmaster.

A big shadow fell over him, a familiar one, and he looked up, blinking. “Well, hello there, sir, you’ve come a long — erk... um...”

The figure stood over him. The moogle gulped.

“Have you dyed your hair?” he said weakly.

The person tried to smile. It didn’t work very well.

“I’m a friend,” he said finally, with a voice like crushed coal. “I want... you to show me where you get your letters from.”

“Er,” Mook said. He felt a bit weak in the wings. “I’m sort of not allowed to do that. Mr. Coral said he’d rip my wings off. He’d get angry. It’s a secret.”

“Let us just say that more than your wings will get ripped off if you make *me* angry.” The enormous man thought a bit. “It is an emergency, you see.”

Mook felt a bit relieved, although something didn’t feel right about it. “Oh. Um. Well, I suppose that adds up. I’ll send a letter after I tell you the way to make sure — you know, just in case, and things...”

“What is the way?”

“North and then northwest from the big dead oak tree. He collects his letters on the rock in the clearing there. You go directly from here. What’s your name so I can tell Mr. Tribal?”

“I’m very sorry,” the man apologized.

“Cor, sorry for what?” Mook asked, perplexed.

Silence dominated the clearing.

Then it was broken very sudden by the sharp shrill shriek of a moogle.

And once more it was silent, and Rohgn smiled.

5. Tyr

Anam Cara

tyr

morning

"I didn't realize you were a tracker."

"I'm not." He just stood and breathed in deep for a moment, contemplating his next move. "But I ask — could you follow your Garnet wherever she went?"

Zidane stood and scratched his head for a while. "Yeah," he said finally. "Wherever she went. I suck at tracking, but... I'd look everywhere."

"So you know how I feel."

The blonde sighed, eventually. “Fratley,” he started hesitantly. “I know this isn’t the time or place, but...”

He turned to look at him, that hat covering his eyes. “What is it?”

“Are you sure you love her still? You lost your memory. You’re not the same guy.” Aware that Fratley was staring, Zidane hurried up. “It’s just that, you know, you might get confused...”

“I still love her,” he said simply. “I don’t know how but I do. That is why I am searching — to ask forgiveness.”

“For?”

“For not being the same man.” Fratley turned away again shortly and went out into the undergrowth. “Come, Zidane. She’s this way.”

“I’m such a fool,” Mook moaned at his companion as he lay bleeding in the undergrowth. “I broke every code there is, honest, they should kick me out of Mognet... at least, they should kick me out after they burn my sorry carcass...”

“Mook,” Stiltzkin said patiently. “It’s not your fault. You made a mistake. Now you just have to make up for it.”

“I’m gonna die, right?... I want you to tell my momma I love her, and tell Moguo I’m sorry, and tell my cousin Momatose it was me who ate that nut and I blamed it on that dog just so that he wouldn’t be mad at me, and —”

“You’re going to have a nasty scar, Mook, but you’re not leaving this vale of tears yet,” the moogle said drily.

“... and tell Mr. Tribal and Mr. Coral I’m sorry, and — what?”

“He missed, Mook. It was shallow. He must have thought you were dead when you fainted and left.”

“... I’m not going to die?”

“No. You’re full to the gills with potion anyway, you’re probably healthier than you were before. You just need a little time for the wound to close.”

Mook pondered this, then screwed up his nose. “Oh, darn. And I thought I was a hero. What are we sitting here for? Let’s contact Mr. Zidane and Mr. Tribal before it’s too late!”

Stiltzkin rolled his eyes.

He awoke with the sunrise, as he always did, only to find his cheek on Freya's stomach with her hand curled tightly in his hair. Amarant jerked in surprise, but then realized that to do so would awake her from her slumber; her breath was deep and easy. Somehow, he didn't have the heart to.

Damnit, you've gone soft, he cursed himself. You bring her in, you tell her what you're thinking, you tell her your history even, you care whether she lives or dies. That's the perfect setup to get hurt. What happened to cool, calm, collected Amarant? Gonna live snapping at her heels like a puppy? Where did freedom go?

The words lost all bite the once-cynical man might have carried with them, because he knew in his heart the answers to the questions nobody needed to ask. *I brought her in when she could have taken care of herself, she tells me her secrets, she tells me her feelings, she cares whether I live or die. If I go down — I'm taking her with me.*

Is that freedom?

He felt her breathe, her hand stirring slightly within the coarse confines of his mane, saw the deep cuts and bruises his own hands had made, and the painful marks on his own body that she had left in turn. He was sleeping on her body, with the pure simple trust that he would not tear her throat or her stomach out and kill her where she lay. Freya knew that he could.

No, Amarant told himself. *Even worse.*

This is friendship.

With a slight chuckle, and not willing to stir her, he went back to sleep.

She was close. Oh, sweet drahen-den, she was so close he could taste her on the wind, smell her blood running through his veins, see her heart as he pulled it out of her chest and ate it in front of her bleeding eyes — close, close, close. Nothing mattered any more except the *vengeance*, running through his veins instead of blood, pushing him down the steep hill as he almost smashed into the steep rockface of the cliff.

Frantically he searched the perimeter, looked for openings, caves, anything; he found none. She was so *close*.

Freya Crescent of Burmecia, your end is nigh. I shall slit you open and butter your remains over the soil and the earth. I shall pop your eyeballs. I shall break open your bones and suck out the marrow. You, the last, you shall fall — fall onto the earth and shatter into a million bloodied pieces. I shall crack open your head and tear out the brains...

She was on top of the cliff. She had to be. There he would find her.

Strapping his mattock to his back and his fingers to the dusty walls, Rohgn began to climb, and climb, and climb...

noon

When he finally *did* awake the sun was high in the sky, riding overhead, as if mocking him for the fact that he had slept for many, many hours. Groaning and stiff-muscled, he moved off Freya and

watched her turn sleepily, roused; her hand grasped at her midsection where his head had been, then she rolled over, muttered and went back to sleep.

Amarant watched her for a moment, rolling his eyes; her cuts had crusted over, but still looked painful. He searched in his clothes absently and brought out a flask of potion; it wouldn't be so good if he didn't administer it by mouth, but application to skin would at least do a little. He spread it over his fingers and quickly wiped them over her shoulder, her cheekbone, the bruises on her thighs, the cut on her calf, the gash on her arm; he felt slightly embarrassed touching her when she wore so little clothes, but when the lines on Freya's face relaxed and her cuts shrivelled he convinced himself it wasn't sacrilege.

Dumping the rest of it over his wounded back he stood, yawning, grumbling inwardly for letting that stupid woman make him sleep in so long. Really, she'd mucked up his entire timetable.

It didn't stop him moving to the kettle to light a fire beneath it so that she could have water for her damned tea, though, and his subconscious telling him *you are SO incredibly whipped, Coral*.

Pulling on his pants and touching up the bindings on his hands and feet, he knelt at the side of the lake and washed his face. The water was getting subtly cooler; autumn would be moving in soon. He'd told a half— lie to Freya; the winters here were not only bitter, they were *arctic*, and he was not willing to spend another one here again. Perhaps Zidane would have caught that goddamn killer and they could get out of here...

Not 'they'. You. Her. Go separate ways. Been nice knowing you, never talk to me again, I promise to give you a Winter Solstice card. Amarant filled the kettle with water and placed it over the modest fire. Had a use for you, but had's the operative word..

*... sounds like something I'd fuckin' do. Damnit, what's **happened** to me?*

He tried to put it out of his mind, walking beneath the cool trees of Aless as he woke himself up. It was almost like a cathedral here, the detritus and the forest floor beneath his feet, the scent of the leaves assaulting his senses; Amarant had grown up here, played in the branches. If he listened hard enough he could almost hear his mother calling, half — exasperated and half-laughing, as she searched for him. Unfortunately, his red hair nearly always

gave him away, bright and bloodfresh against the cool green of the sunlit leaves and earthy tones of the grey-brown bark, trilling birdsong not quite hiding his snickers from her...

The breezes blew softly throughout the tiny valley, rustling the leaves above him. He supposed Freya had to be awake by now, and turned back...

There was a soft thump behind him.

No game lived in the valley. No bird big enough lived in the valley. Could a monster have gotten in? Hmph! He doubted it, but better to be safe than end up bitten. A disgusted look on Amarant's face, he turned around and silently walked forward...

...and gaped.

The intruder had slid, obviously off the steep cliff, dusty and grazed into the middle of the clearing. His tough grey skin still shone darkly through the dust, the pale grey like stone, rough like the same material; his waist-length hair was dark blue like the twilight, coarse as hemp, roped and braided into a topknot and tucked away from a face so scarred there was barely any feature left.

The man stood out in the clearing like blood against water, leather pants worn and spotted on his

legs, a queer little linen loincloth wrapped around his hips for show. His chest had nothing on it but two crisscrossed strips of bright yellow cloth, and oddly, he was decorated all over with matte pieces of metal, chokered around his neck and on his arms; they were tight in such a way that he walked without a sound. A piece of chainmail was strung over his shoulder in the same fashion.

Brown eyes stared into matching brown, hands that wielded a massive war mattock tightened as both gaped. Both shared jagged, angular faces, finely pointing chins, large, calloused hands...

Finally, the silence was broken, but Amarant was mute.

“My name is Rohgn aut Koralle,” he grated in a voice like nails. “Who the fuck are you?”

“*What?*” Queen Garnet fairly screamed, then immediately looked contrite at the nonplussed messenger, sitting on her windowsill. “Stiltzkin, how could this happen?”

“He’s young. He’s inexperienced. He swears black and blue that the man looked *exactly* like Mr.

Coral.” He sighed. “Don’t be angry with him, *kupo*. He’s in Central now, and he got a bad fright and an awful knock on the head.”

“My Queen?” It was Steiner, looking worried as he entered the room, clanking to her shriek. She brushed away a curl nervously from her cheek and began to pace across the plush carpet of her little waitingroom, hands clenched. “What is the matter?”

“The murderer’s in the area that Freya and Amarant are in,” she said tersely, immediately switching to Tactical Cool Royalty mode. “And Zidane and Sir Fratley, too. I don’t know whether they’re made it ahead — or are behind — either way, *somebody’s* in danger, and it’s not the murderer.”

“What do you want me to do, my queen?”

“That’s just *it*,” she half-wailed, flinging herself down in a chair, entertaining horrible images of Zidane being sneaked up upon and murdered in some ghastly manner. Of course, he was one of the most competent fighters she knew — and he was with Fratley to boot — but she was nervous and unhappy and afraid for at least three people, which was never entertaining. ‘We can’t do anything. Obviously that murderer’s going in to have a

showdown with Freya, and with as far away as we are, all we can do is cross our fingers and hope for the best.’ Garnet turned to Stiltzkin hopefully. “Couldn’t we go in an airship?”

“He’d hear it coming,” the moogle reckoned. “If he runs away again, your lady Freya will still just be in as much danger, kupo.”

The queen sighed. “I suppose I’m being silly. Four amazing fighters, one man — how much harm could he do?”

None of them knew, and that was the unnerving part.

Finally, panic-stricken and half-ready to gnash her teeth in frustration, Garnet began to bite her nails.

Amarant was down on his knees like the frightened child he was, just out of sheer habit, before he actually realized what he was doing and got up again, angry and confused. “My name is S’alamant aut Koralle,” he snapped back acidly, sarcasm covering his total shock, eyes burning. “And you’re the one intruding on *my* territ —”

He could not finish, for Rohgn had dropped the mattock and flung his arms around him openly, laughing wildly and giving him such thumps on the back that it was almost bruising. “You are Damheano’s!” he exclaimed in the accent that sent such grief down his spine in remembrance that he stiffened. “You must be. Damheano’s or T’ianthe’s, at least?”

Amarant moved back slightly, wary. “Damheano’s,” he muttered, feeling like an infant, lost and at sea. “She was my — mother.”

“Ah, ah. The hair found you. When I last saw Damheano’s brood you were only two claws high.” The smile on the scarred, ruined face was completely unnerving. “Shit. How did you survive? Did not Damheano die?”

“A dozen winters or so ago. She took me from the mountains before the *basrii* came.” The shock was beginning to wear off and he shifted back into comfortable, screaming paranoia. “How’d you get in here? What do you want?”

“I climbed.” Rohgn sized the young one up, how bent he was from slouching, trying to hide what he truly was. He moved back and picked up his mattock. “Don’t fear so. Your mother and I were

cousins-by— mating. I came here looking for a monster up in the mountains here. You can help me, maybe you would have seen the beast.”

A great leaden weight clutched his heart. “*You*,” he spat. “You’re here to —”

“Amarant, who are you talking t — oh!”

Damn, at all the stupid times to awaken! “Freya, go get your fucking spear!”

Rohgn had already rushed her the moment he heard her voice, mattock swinging in a wide arc; she jumped back and somersaulted to behind Amarant, clenching her fists, wide-eyed and wondering how in hell’s name to defend herself against a war mattock.

“She is under *my* protection!” Amarant bellowed at him. “Fight with her and kill a Korable!”

“You’re INSANE!” the other man shrieked back, voice ragged and edgy with shock, staring at the Burmecian with such intense loathing in his eyes that she growled. “By the *drahkenden*, are you mad? Are you blind? Are you deaf and dumb?”

“Why do you want her? What has she done?”

“What has she *done*? What has she done!” Rohgn howled before looking back at them. He noticed

both of their states of undress, and gagged immediately; he had to turn to get back his composure, spitting and shaking with anger. “Oh, sweet fang and claw, you’ve *mated* — how can you? How can you willfully shame your dead like this? I swear you’ll die along with her!”

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?” Amarant finally bellowed.

Rohgn looked at the two in distaste, lips curling as if he wanted to vomit. “You don’t know. You truly don’t know.” He brandished his mattock at them viciously. “You fucking stupid *diezrhren*, you’ve been rutting with a *basrii*!”

Freya felt Amarant stumble back, then when he touched her, immediately barrel back forward. “Lie,” he whispered. “That’s a goddamn lie.”

Rohgn ignored him and turned to the very bemused Freya. “And *you*,” he hissed, “Killer, murderer, thieving bitch — did you know he was a *drahken* or were you merely toying?”

It was her who stumbled this time, widening her eyes and opening her mouth in a perfect little O.

“Yai, *basrii*. It was *your* kind who killed us, your kind who took the name ‘drahkenknights’ and razed

our city. And you didn't know. You didn't even know."

"It was a dragon cult," she whispered. "They said it was a dragon cult."

"And may those same *drahkenden* give me the holy strength to take you out!" Rohgn curled his lip at Amarant, leaning against a tree with a look of utter blankness on his face and voids behind his eyes. "Watch me take her out, S'alamant. Watch the last one die."

"Fool!" Freya mocked him. "I'm not the last, never the last! Some of the Dragon Knights may be old, but they still exist; and Fratley —"

"I killed them all," came the cackling, hooting reply, voice moving up to a shriek. "And as for Iron-tail Fratley's worthless head, I pounded it against a rock again and again until the blood ran from his ears! Then I threw him from a cliff! The *basrii*'s greatest hero will talk no more."

Freya's heart literally stopped. She felt the insistent beat against her ribs, then an screaming, electric pause; there was an agonizing stillness before it picked up again, harder and heavier and more harried than before, howling inside her chest.

“I challenge you to single combat,” she spat crisply, reverting to Knight Crescent before her heart could scream in sorrow. “One against one, weapons, to the death.”

“Why should I trust a lying *basrii* like you?” Rohgn challenged.

The Burmecian cocked her head sharply. “Amarant is our witness. He can bury the loser.”

“And avenge the loser?”

“No. He will not intervene.”

Amarant appeared not to have even heard.

“No armour. I want this fight to be fast.”

Rohgn raised an eyebrow, divesting himself of the chainmail hung over his shoulder and pulled taut down his back. “Your funeral, *basrii*. Go get your weapon.” He brandished his own, the long mattock, much like a garden hoe with the wicked armour-piercing spike at the end. “Then you will die.”

She bowed low to him, curtseying with sarcastic stiffness, then left between the trees. The blue-haired *drahken* turned.

“Don’t worry your little head about it, S’alamant,” he said diffidently. “After she is dead you and the Koralle will be free from her curse.”

He said nothing.

“How did your mother die when she fled from them, young one? Was it long and lingering? Could she have lived if they had not attacked?”

“Fuck off,” Amarant said listlessly.

“I’ll kill her slowly for you. I’ll make her scream harder than you ever did.”

“Fuck *off*, you sorry bag of shit.”

“I’m ready.”

She stood in the middle of the clearing, and what remnants of Amarant’s heart was left broke. Once more was Freya decked out in the scarlet coat of her homeland, her helmet laid aside; she’d tied a strip of cloth around her hair to keep it out of her face, and her expression was a rainbow of conflicting emotions. Amarant counted mad fury, indecision and deep grief before he couldn’t look any more.

Rohgn’s voice was deeply sardonic. “Any prayers you wish to make before you die?”

“Are you always just so much talk, drahkenspawn?”

“Godless *basrii* heathen.”

She bowed with heart-stopping grace, the Dragon Hair held tightly in her sweaty palms. “Let the fight begin, *drahken*,” she spat. “Let the fight begin.”

afternoon

She couldn't win.

Amarant knew she couldn't win. She had injuries all over her, was quite obviously fatigued, and although she was in excellent condition the hands that held her spear were trembling just slightly. He should have woken her up, should have given her the potion to drink for herself, should've, should've

... did he even want her to win?

The treacherous thought lay in his mind like a disease. All he could see was his mother, doubled-over and coughing so much that her breath was lost.

His entire childhood — and a large portion of his adulthood — had been fuelled by the desperate raging hatred felt for the basrii, felt for the people who destroyed his natural home, felt for the monsters who had inadvertantly killed his mother. If it were not for the Burmecians — damn them, damn them! — he could still be living in the mountains, and his mother might still be alive, and his family... he could have lived a normal life, and not eked out an existence as a hunter and a thief...

But Freya...

Amarant tried to watch dispassionately as the two circled each other, Freya light on her feet almost like a dancer, Rohgn heavy and ominous as he paced the meadow opposite. It was their fight, and he could not intervene.

They came together so fast if he had blinked he would have missed it; Rohgn made the first charge. This was not a duel; it was a race to see who could murder the other first in cold blood. The large drahken aimed for her vital areas, chest and head and legs; she had to spend all her time parrying before she got some sneaky moves in. Freya managed to push him back and away with a quick slashing foot movement that Amarant recognized

he'd taught her, and felt a small surge of pride through the nausea.

He watched her fight and kick and slam with the butt of her pike to give herself some space, leaving Rohgn bleeding from minor wounds and hers limping from a stunning blow to the side from the flat of his mattock. It was incredibly frustrating for him to watch; she should have been able to have the advantage easily, as Rohgn wielded a melee weapon, but he seemed to have a body made entirely out of water as he dodged and slipped past her pike. She didn't have room to move.

Freya went beserk, using her hefty pike as a bludgeon now, trying to move him away. The drahken's response was to hack away at her legs with all the ferocity of a wild animal, his expression set; she used the leeway to vault over his shoulder and dart into the air, powerful legs like a spring as she disappeared.

And Rohgn laughed.

It had no humour in it. It was merely a sound like the memory of a laugh, high and keening, and Amarant realized that Rohgn was insane. It didn't surprise him — when entire chunks of life were spent looking for vengeance and covered in blood,

the mind dissipated into nothing more than held-together thoughts of bitter revenge and burning anger. Rohgn du Koralle was a shell, less than a shell.

And... and... it was all the *basrii*'s fault.

Amarant watched numb as Rohgn calmly stood in the middle of the clearing, eyes closed and muttering to voices only he could hear, as if unaware that Freya was positioning her pike above him to split his skull open and leave him dead on the forest floor. His breath was held as he heard the familiar whine of her descent before he even knew it.

Rohgn merely cocked his head to one side as she came down, then *snatched* her out of the air in one smooth practiced motion that left Freya dangling in one of his hands like a ragdoll. Dazedly she squirmed, the Dragon Hair almost falling out of her hands in her desperate attempt to gain control back of the situation.

Shit! Sweet zombie-fucking drahkenden, he'd plucked her right out of the air like she was a fly! That was goddamn *impossible*! How many dragoons had this bastard taken down? Was Freya about to become one of the many?

She didn't deserve this, damn it. She... she hadn't even been on the raid; she hadn't even been *born* at the time of the raid. It wasn't her fault.

Rohgn flung her to the ground, all the air choked out of her lungs as he sized her up, repositioning his mattock. Then, quite apathetically, he slammed it down on her leg.

The crack was sickening, as was her bitten-off scream of agony. Icewater ran through Amarant's veins.

Rohgn stood in front of her, crippled and exposed, a pathetic sight to see. "If you beg for mercy, I can make it quick," he purred.

She turned her face away from him, teeth gritted, body jerking with the force of the pain. Her hands tightened around the shaft of her pike, her breath coming in sharp staccato bursts.

"Can't hear you, *basrii*," he mocked. "Say it louder."

With trembling dignity, she raised her right hand and gave a very pointed answer with one of her fingers.

“Ah, well,” Rohgn sighed. “See you in hell, Crescent.”

His mattock lifted, the sharp point of the blade glinting in the afternoon sunlight.

Freya dreamily looked up at it, ignoring the insistent hammering of her heart as she saw Rohgn’s arms lift. So this was how it all ended, assassinated on her back? She was a fool, a stupid fool to be duped so easily, slow in the air and broken on the ground...

If only she had five more seconds, if only she had *two*, if only, if only...

There was a rapid-fire of two of Amarant’s circular throwing knives as they whistled in the air and shallowly buried themselves in Rohgn’s back. Rohgn gave a low bellow of pain, stumbling forward, mattock in hand —

With her last burst of strength, Freya slammed the Dragon Hair up into his neck, up and splintering bone and skin and spurting blood —

And Amarant started running —

Half alive and half dead Rohgn screamed with the wreckage of his throat, not allowing his revenge

to be taken from him so easily. With the last burst of adrenaline to his body before the point of her spear pierced his brain, he slammed his mattock down in her chest, letting it bury itself there before he fell back onto the bloodstained grass, twitching.

Amarant kicked his body away and kneeled beside the Burmecian as she fell back with a cry, eyes clenched shut as her hands fell limply at her sides. He caught one up in his, wiping the blood away from her face as she tore at the air in her effort to breathe.

“Shit, Freya,” he said, voice trembling spasmodically. “This is all my fucking fault. I’m an idiot, I’m a — open your eyes, damnit! Don’t you dare close your goddamn eyes!”

They fluttered open obediently as she fought to stop her eyelids drooping, fingers curling around his own. “Am-arant,” she rasped.

“I’m just going to cast a spell or somethin’, okay? Then I’ll get you outta here. You’re safe now, no thanks to me. Just lie still and I’ll — I’ll... do something.”

“Amarant.”

“This is all my fault. Damnit, Freya, I’m so sorry. I’ve never been so sorry before in my entire life.”

“*Amarant.*”

“And... don’t die on me. I’ll never forgive you if you die. I’ll never forgive *me* if you die. If you die, I’m going to fuckin’ *kill* you.”

“Amarant Coral!” she spat hoarsely, eyes wide open now, claws digging weakly into the palm of his hand. “Can you *please* get this mattock out of my chest?”

He watched her body rack with agonizing coughs, suspicion and hope suddenly skyrocketing. With clumsy fingers, Amarant slowly unbuttoned her coat, then ripped open her bloodstained tunic.

The head of the mattock was deeply embedded in her breastplate.

She grinned lopsidedly at his staring, exhaling slowly. “Fights aren’t... usually fair, Amarant. You just have to make sure that it’s usually unfair for the other person.”

Amarant traced around the weapon before a large smile broke over his face, tugging it out with a heave and unfastening the straps that held the

armour to her body. “You fucking amazing little cheat!”

Her body spasmed with coughs again, but she was laughing, trying to weakly fend him off. “Ow, ow, stop it! You better have some healing spells in there, my leg is killing me... Amarant, if you don’t want to get an eyeful stop it, I’m not wearing anything under the plate. I think half my ribs are bloody broken... hey!”

He set her breastplate aside, ignoring her immediate coverup by her hands. There was a large amount of bruising and most likely internal bleeding where the mattock had hit, and she had a number of cuts over her. Muttering beneath his breath, a soft glow emanated from his hands.

Freya sighed in relief as some of the pain ebbed. Her broken ribs and leg still hurt like hell, but Amarant couldn’t heal a broken bone. Only time or a White Mage could do that. Still, the overflowing joy at merely being alive was sweet and satisfying.

“Have you finished staring at my breasts yet?”

“Hadn’t even thought of that.” He stopped busily tearing off his vest to rip into bandages and gave a

quick glance down at where her hands were folded.
“Hmm, not bad.”

“Pervert.” Freya rolled her eyes and pulled her jacket over herself so as to gain a bit of modesty as he tended to the worst of her wounds. There was something odd about his eyes...

“You were crying,” she murmured, lifting one hand up to stroke his cheek.

“Weren’t,” Amarant affirmed.

“Your cheeks are still wet. You were really worried about me.”

“The wind got in my eyes.”

“Did you really care if I was going to live or die?”

“No.”

“Amarant, look at me.”

He obeyed grudgingly, his expression softening just slightly as she struggled to sit up, gasping in pain. He supported her on his arm, and Freya firmly cupped his face in one hand.

“You did save my life, you know,” she said softly. “I couldn’t have hit him if you hadn’t distracted him.”

Amarant shook his head. “If I’d just fought in the first place, none of this shit would have even happened. I’m a coward. I abandoned you.”

“You didn’t, believe me.” She took her hand away and rested her head on his broad shoulder, feeling very much the fatigue that had settled leaden over her body.

“I did. If you’d died because of me... I... don’t know what I would’ve fuckin’ done.” Agitated, he turned his head to look at her on his shoulder. “I don’t want to know.”

“Shush, *anam cara*. I’m fine now.” In a reckless display of affection, she nuzzled his cheek, alarmed at seeing her usually stoic friend so thrown. “I forgive you.”

For one heart-stopping moment of dangerous intimacy, Amarant wrapped his arms around her and held her close, cheek to cheek.

Freya’s laboured breathing and a sudden bout of coughing halted the moment for both, however, and

he set her back to earth. The Burmecian could have sworn he was blushing.

“Put some clothes back on,” he muttered. “I’m gonna go dump this corpse.”

“Okay,” Freya said docilely, pulling her tunic quite gladly back over her front. “Pull my pike out first.”

“Try to get some sleep.”

The order was unnecessary, as Freya had already curled up on her red coat and had sunk, exhausted, into a state of unconsciousness.

Amarant couldn’t help smiling for a moment before grabbing Rohgn’s body and pulling it out of sight. She was cute when she was sleeping, if only because her mouth was shut.

Zidane contemplated the situation. There was no way of scaling the cliff; they had searched all the places that were viable places to live; there were no underground caves. It was time to resort to the last option.

The blonde cupped his hands over his mouth. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaa— mmaaaaaaant!” he bellowed. “Wheeeeeere aaaaaare yooooou!”

“... For the love of the gods, Zidane, don’t fuckin’ shout in my ear.”

Zidane spun around, weapon in hand, to see a very smirking Amarant appear out of nowhere with something — or *someone* — very heavy slung over his shoulder. Amarant let the very lifeless body fall to the forest floor with a thump.

“You bastard,” the Genome said delightedly. “Where the hell did you come from?”

“Inside there,” Amarant admitted, tapping the side of the cliff. “Why’re you here?”

“It’s a long story. How did you get in there?”

“It’s... a long story.”

“Who the hell is that?”

They were both interrupted with the familiar whistle of a jump, with Fratley landing gracefully behind Zidane. Amarant stiffened as the Burmecian stood fully and came to stand beside the others, looking at the corpse.

“Ah,” he said softly. “That explains everything.”

“Hmm, Frat?” Zidane asked kindly. Zidane was very good at making embarrassing nicknames for people who already had good names anyway, but Fratley seemed not to mind. Or to notice.

“I take it that is the murderer we have been hunting?” he asked Amarant.

“Mmm,” he affirmed. “Or *was*.”

“It’s a *drahken*,” Fratley told Zidane quietly. “They have a notorious hatred of Burmecians. Luckily, there appear to be not many of them left, as I recall.”

Amarant stiffened further.

“But... he sort of looks like...” Zidane began, then fell silent.

“I’ll go get Freya,” Amarant grunted. “Go kick this bastard somewhere where the animals can get him.”

The blonde made himself busy by dragging the body behind a bush. Quite thoughtfully he took one of the bloodied glassy strings from around the ruins of the dead man’s neck for identification by Treno authorities. Not that they needed one, anyway; if the

soon to be Prince Consort told them that they'd killed the real murderer, well, then they had bloody well killed the real murderer, no questions asked.

When he came back, Amarant was holding an unconscious Freya Crescent, who looked rather battered; Zidane noticed strips of tattered green canvas binding her wounds.

"... and she's got a broken leg," Amarant was saying. "The nearest healer's in Treno. Dunno about Dali."

Fratley took her from Amarant's arms whilst the large man handed the Dragon Hair and her helmet to Zidane. "Here's her armour. Now piss off."

"Aren't you going to travel with us to a healer?" he asked, puzzled.

"Hell, no. Why would I want to?"

"Freya might ask for you when she wakes up."

Amarant sniggered. "Believe me, there's one rat that ain't gonna ask for me. She doesn't need me any more. I'm outta here." True to his word, he began trudging off, affixing his claw to his hand.

"Arrogant ass," snorted Fratley quietly, cradling the woman in his arms. "Can't even show the proper

respect to a friend.”

Zidane scratched his head, then sighed. “Let’s just get to Dali, Fratley.”

“Good idea, sir Zidane. Let us make haste.”

He shook his head momentarily, wondering if there was anybody else on earth who still said ‘make haste’. “You can tell me what a *drahken* is on the way.”

6. Epilogue

Anam Cara

epilogue

Freya awoke in a proper bed.

She knew it was a proper bed because it had pillows, and didn't smell like grass, and because there were no red strands of hair to tickle her face. Odd the things you begin to associate with your bed.

“Good morning, Freya.”

She turned her head and blinked blearily at the person watching her, trying to sit up as she realized who it was. “Fratley? Where... where am I?”

“You're in Treno.” His hand came out to brush a lock of hair away from her face. “You'll be pleased to know your name's been cleared. The Mayor made a formal apology to King Puck.”

“Aah. That’s a relief.” Freya propped herself up against her pillows, taking a deep breath. There was still a little twinge from her ribs, but other than that, she had most likely been properly healed.

“Aye. I... I hope we can go back to Burmecia when you’re ready,” Fratley said awkwardly. “The city is in much need of us as the Dragon Knights, and King Puck said he would like to start the training again, so that we could have a legacy...”

“Burmecia,” she breathed. Back to Burmecia. Rebuilding a city, all by herself, with the aching loneliness again of Fratley. Could she make it again?

She had to. But —

“I’ll go back,” she said quietly, and watched Fratley’s face light up. “But not yet. Go back before me, and I’ll come with you soon.”

“What must you do first?”

Freya grinned to herself. “Make an offer.”

He looked puzzled, but didn’t question. “Are you sure you do not want me to travel with you —”

“Quite sure,” she said firmly, then put her hand on his. “Fratley... we’re not the same as we used to be.”

He looked down and nodded, his voice almost a whisper. "I... know."

"I don't know whether you'll ever get all your memories back." She had to steel herself, or else her heart will break. "But I can't live waiting for that to happen. We can't both live waiting for that to happen. We have to live for the future, for the present."

"And your future... does not see me as a lover."

Her fingers tangled with his, her eyes burning fiercely. "I don't know what the future holds, Fratley. If it sees you as my lover, then I'll embrace it; if it does not, I'll embrace it still. However, I do know one thing it does see; I will *always* love you. Nothing can ever change that."

His voice trembled slightly now, their hands clasped. "I love you too, Freya, now and always. That is all... I ever need."

Freya smiled at him warmly, looking as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "My dear friend. Travel back to Burmecia and I promise I'll join you there later."

"As you wish, my lady."

“But first...” She pulled the covers back, smoothing her clean tunic down her front. “Where’s Amarant? I need to talk to him.”

Fratley steeled himself inwardly. “Uh... he’s not here.”

“What?” She spun around. “What do you mean? Is he in the city?”

“I don’t know. He left after giving you to us at the place you hid.”

She looked utterly aghast. “Where did he go?”

“I know not. He didn’t say. He just left.”

Freya issued a string of expletives that would have made the red-haired drahen proud, flinging on her leather jacket and breeches before cramming on her helmet.

“Freya, you’re not well enough to go anywhere yet,” Fratley protested as she viciously grabbed the Dragon Hair.

She ignored him and promptly strode out the room.

“Women,” Fratley sighed, shaking his head.

Amarant Coral didn't give a damn about a lot of things. He quite pointedly didn't give a damn that he wouldn't be there to see Freya wake up. He didn't give a damn that he didn't give a damn about that situation either, and what's more, he didn't give a damn that he didn't give a damn that he didn't give a —

He sighed. Not giving a damn often gave him quite a headache.

He slumped down in the little clearing that he and Lani had camped out in so often, back against a tree. Even after walking for days, something was intricately wrong inside his head. He'd been more alone than this many times in his life; why the hell couldn't he cope?

Why did he even *care*?

Amarant rubbed his forehead. The first mistake he had made was to offer shelter for her when Rohgn came along. No, wait. His first mistake was to even look twice at her when he'd gone with Zidane. He'd l — liked her from the start.

Well, fuck that. Fuck Fratley, fuck Freya, and fuck him for being stupid enough to get involved in the first place!

He quietly pulled a shred of cloth out of his vest. It was a piece of the tunic she'd worn until it fell apart; Freya had washed it devoutly, but eventually it just fell into rags. It still smelt exactly like her, and of Aless, and if he closed his eyes he could still remember both —

“Damnit!” he howled. No! No no *no*!

Amarant heard the familiar crackle of footsteps on the leaves behind him, and folded his arms sullenly. No reason to appear anything other than what was normal in front of his partner. “You’re fuckin’ late, Lani,” he grunted.

Crimson jacket and long spear slumped beside him tiredly as Freya shook her hair, taking off her helmet. “Sorry to disappoint,” she said sardonically. “Only me.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Why, thank you. I’m utterly glad to see you too.”

Amarant was at a complete loss for words. “How... where... how did you know where to get me, you stupid rat?”

“If I didn’t know how to track you by now, I’d be a very poor dragoon.” She was glaring at him, but her eyes were soft. “Now, why the hell did you run off on me?”

“Why should I have hung around?” he countered. “You don’t need me any more, and I never needed you in the first place.”

“Ah-ha.” Her voice could have emanated from the Ice Cavern. “Pardon me for thinking you cared enough for me to be there when I woke up.”

“You’re a fool,” the drahen said flatly. “I don’t care.”

“Look at me in the eyes and say that, Amarant.”

He turned around and looked at her, and the words on his lips died. “Oh, fuck it,” he said in defeat.

They sat in quiet silence for a little while, listening to the wind through the trees.

“What does it mean?” he asked abruptly.

“Pardon?” Freya asked, genuinely confused.

“What you called me back in Aless. *Anam cara*.”

“Oh!” She blushed pinkly, then dug her hand inside her coat, carefully ripping out some of the brightly red lining. “Give me your hand. The one with the claw.”

Confused, Amarant did so. Her claws deftly wound the cherry-coloured material around the metal base of his weapon, tying it tight enough so that it could not come apart.

“It means soul friend,” Freya said quietly. “It means we’re bound, intricately and tightly, just like the cloth I place on you now. You don’t have a tail, so your weapon is the next best thing.”

Amarant looked at the ragged yellow strip on her own tail. “That came from Fratley,” he guessed.

“His old coat. Yes.”

He looked at it for a long while, then the forlorn strip of red decorating his claws, before sighing and tugging off a long frayed piece from his own vest. “Here,” he grumbled.

Her face lit up, and almost tenderly she interwove the dark green of it with the yellow, tucking and tying and pulling it tight.

There was another long silence.

“What’re you going to do now?” Freya asked after a while, voice subdued.

“...Wait for Lani. I guess. I dunno where the hell she is...” An idea struck him. “Maybe she left a message or something.” Amarant stood and dug his hand into the hollow tree they usually stuck their flimsy, digging around in the dank opening to see if his fingers struck paper. Eventually they did, and he brought it out.

’Dear Amarant!

I guess it’s my turn to be lucky in love and all that stuff eh? The nice man I met has turned out to be the love of my life and I’ve decided to get married to him. He’s much older than I am, but he’s in love with me too and he’s a doctor as well (read: loaded!) I can’t be a bountyhunter any more. I decided that here. I’m getting old and none of my family ever lived past thirty anyway so maybe I can break it huh! Anyway, Jules and I are engaged. I’ll invite you to the wedding, not like you’d come anyway you bastard. Come and see me some time in Treno okay?

I’m very happy. Jules says I make him laugh.

The best and most beautiful ex-bounty-hunter ever, Lani (Tot)!’

Amarant wordlessly handed the piece of paper to Freya. She scanned it down.

Then both of them doubled over and laughed until they cried.

After they had laid down on the ground and gotten over the phenomenon that the words ‘Lani Tot’ made them explode into sniggers, Freya rolled over and grinned at her comrade. “So now what are you going to do?”

The red-haired man sobered and looked up at the sky. “Shit. I dunno. Go back to bountyhunting or something.”

“‘Bountyhunting’?”

“You know what I mean.”

She took a deep breath and sat up a little, bracing herself on her hands, looking down at his face. “You know... there’s always another option.”

“Sell my body to lonely ladies on the street?”

Freya burst into giggles at that thought, then smacked his shoulder gently. “Be serious, you idiot. No... I was wondering if... you’d like to come back to Burmecia with me.”

That got his attention. “What?”

“Help me rebuild,” she begged. “You could also help train the children. Hell, you’re a legal Burmecian citizen — you were born in the mountains above the damn city, Amarant. I... I want to bring you back home.”

“Why?” he demanded, sitting up to look at her. “I’ve never been wanted by anyone, Freya, why start now?”

“You *know* why!” she exploded, then sighed, both of them looking down. “I — I just —”

Amarant stopped her this time, placing one finger on her lips. “You don’t need to say it,” he said gruffly. “Gods know you shouldn’t feel it, let alone say it. You’re insane, woman.”

“About as insane as you, *anam cara*.”

Both lay back down again on the loam.

“So,” Amarant started after a while. “Burmecia’s bloody full of rain, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She rolled over on her hip, suspicious. “Why?”

“No reason... just trying to get used to the thought of being damn soggy all the time.”

Her heart leapt. “You’re going to come with me?”

“Not like I have anything better to do, rat. Ow! Hey, get *off* me, woman! I’m only going for my own personal benefit! Not yours! Get *off*!”

The little area rang with the half-angry sounds of a drahen being hugged.

And when fate’s road is chosen, what do you do?

Forget about it? Ignore it? Wander aimlessly away? Try to let fate play out once more with a more suitable ending?

Fate may write your destined path, but you get to write your own happy ending.

Life’s odd that way.

Dedications:

To my brother and my nasty evil beta-reader, Piett, without whom I would not know the difference

between a spear and a pike, and without whom this would have devolved long ago into an OOC lemon;

*My lovely, lovely reviewers — Byrn, Sachiko, Nik, Celetina, Avery, Akakay, **all** of you cool amazing people, without whom I would have given this up long ago and gone back to playing with my FFIIX dollies;*

The characters themselves, who most probably wanted to go on strike many times after the inevitable screwups;

Rohgn: Can't hear you, basrii. Say it — hey, can I do this scene again? I haven't got the feel of the character. I just need more... time to meld...

Amarant: Oh, for fuck's sake... all you need to do is bloody foam at the mouth and look evil. What more *feel* do you need?

Rohgn: Bursts into tears Abuse, abuse, abuse! It's all I get! And Guardian can't spell my name right half the time! That's it! I'M GOING BACK TO MY TRAILER!

Freya: Am I so ugly?

Amarant: Probably... I just haven't looked yet.

Freya: Then maybe you *should* so we can clear the matter up!

Amarant:...Mmmmmhmm. Nice rack. Now wiggle.

Me: HEY! That's not in the script!

Freya: What IS it with this fanfic and me being nude?

Amarant: Stop complaining and take one for the team!

The people on Uncreativity's forum, for helping me discuss the exact nature of Amarant's skin colour and helping me celebrate Amarant Butt-Appreciation Day (please don't ask);

*And you the reader, who has just taken the time and effort to read this behemoth. I thank you from the bottom of my little heart! — **Guardian***

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